Masks Within Masks

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Masks Within Masks

by Kyprish_Prophetess

Summary

Donald found himself at odds without the kids around 24/7, so he decides to answer a call from SHUSH to come back online.

Everything spirals from there

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Old Habits

Donald took a bit of time to notice it, honestly. He thought he could be forgiven, under the circumstances. He just got back from the Moon, there was the invasion, Della returning, and the chaos of integrating the Moonlanders with Duckburg (because they all decided to stay in one city, too used to each others' proximity to want to move), and with all of this going on, it took some time to realize it, but eventually…

The kids were too busy to spend any time with him.

They weren't mean about it, was the thing that he realized first. They didn't make up a lie about being busy, or avoid him, exactly; it was just that usually, Huey would sit with him and talk about whatever topic he was researching, or the badges he was working on. Dewey would practice his new acts or yo-yo tricks with him. Louie liked to watch TV with people, all the better to make fun of the shows, and Donald didn't mind him talking over most of the show. Even Webby sought him out sometimes, usually for ridiculous stories of Scrooge and now, Della.

But now that he was back, he was realizing that those little moments seemed to be gone. Della seemed to have stepped right into each one; Huey and Della sitting together excitedly talking about Junior Woodchucks, Dewey and Della singing karaoke or pulling elaborate tricks along the banisters of the Manor. Louie and Della didn't seem to spend a lot of time together, but he was the only one. Webby followed Della like a lost duckling, stars in her eyes, asking for more and more stories.

He didn't resent it, he didn't! Or, he didn't want to at least. Della had been missing for ten years, and he wasn't here when she arrived; obviously there had been a gap in their routines, and she slipped into it like she had never been gone. Which was good, so good, it was genuinely the best thing to happen to him, seeing her after eleven

years. Seeing her actually get to raise her kids like she should have been doing from the start (and whose fault was that? But he could not, would not, think about that).

It would be nice, though, not to feel like he had been the placeholder parent, for them to be able to work as a team again. But the kids were used to only having one parent, it seemed, and, well. Everyone always preferred Della over Donald. He'd gotten ten years, it was her turn.

He didn't step back, exactly; he wanted to make sure the kids could seek him out if they wanted, so he couldn't go far. He had to make sure they knew he would always be there, no matter what happened.

(Because the other adults in the family had proved they wouldn't be there, not always, not if something shiny and new showed up, not if they were too hurt and too set in their own grief and pain to just reach out-)

But he didn't need to be at the Manor all day and night, and SHUSH had been trying to get him back to active status for years. He could do one, see if he was still any good at this. All it took was one phone call with a bored junior agent, who transferred him to a significantly more excited agent, then an email with directions to their office (like he had forgotten where it was). He had thought it would feel more significant, but it just felt… right, like this was a step he had been waiting to take.

He had, nervously, told the family he would be gone for a few days, that the job required travel and he would be back soon. He expected them to ask questions, a lot of them, had concocted an entire lie just in case (much as he hated to lie to the kids), but…

"Sounds like a great opportunity Uncle Donald!" Huey enthused at

dinner, grinning widely at him.

“You’ll have your phone on you, right?” Louie asked, looking up from his plate. He looked concerned, and Donald nodded, opening his mouth to reply, but was cut off by Scrooge at the other end of the table.

“Ach, I’m sure Donald will text you every hour like the mother hen he is, no need to fret,” he said, and waved off the topic with an absent movement. “Now! Let’s finish eating so we can plan our next adventure!”

And that was the end of that; Donald tried to catch Louie to make sure he was okay, but he was brushed off; Louie only joked to text them before getting launched to the Moon next time, before following the family to the study, already grinning at the prospect of another adventure.

So when Donald finally left for his first mission in several years, it was with little fanfare and no questions. The house was all but empty, and Bentina didn’t even look up from her novel when he left.

The mission started smoothly; almost suspiciously so. He had expected to be out of practice, even for the simple task of breaking into a kingpin’s stronghold to get intel from their computer systems. He didn’t even have to travel far; their hideout was a set of warehouses along the bay, fenced in and guarded at all times. Playing the plausible deniability of being a legit shipping company, while they moved counterfeit money and drugs.

And sure, the process was longer than it would have been a decade ago, but the basics of breaking and entering, of slipping along without notice and operating in the shadows of a complex was something that you didn’t really forget.

It was while he was crouched on the roof, watching the guard rotation to time his movement, that he realized he was grinning. He had always felt less clumsy, less unlucky really, on missions and his own adventures. Each movement felt like the moves to a dance he hadn't done in a long time, and as he broke into the main office he felt alive in a way he hadn't in so long, like this was something he had been missing for… for.

Well. Eleven years.

Donald had never regretted raising the boys, not for a single moment. Not even when they were all screaming at 3 AM, not when they were trying to sneak out late to go to an arcade, not when he had to skimp and stretch to make ends meet and keep them all fed and warm.

But, he had lost contact with a lot of friends over the years. The Caballeros, Goofy and Mickey, his cousins, Lyla, Storkules, Perry. And he had lost some of who he was over time, too. He had wanted to be normal, and to be safe, for the boys, and so little of his life had been safe and normal, he had ended up over-compensating. The boys, they had wanted to go places, and he had stifled them in an effort to keep them safe, to keep them away from adventures and the places that he had lost so many people (Della and Uno and Kay and- and- and-)

And apparently he had stifled himself right along with the boys.

The guards were poorly trained, or Donald was used to better, because it was easy to move between them without notice, his movements a whisper. The bodysuit SHUSH had given him would stand up to a lot of abuse, but he wanted to avoid a fight. Any sign that they had had an intruder, and the gang would change their plans if they were smart.

Then again, he thought, seeing a group of guards betting on dice at the guard post and very much not working, maybe that was over-selling their abilities.

He handed over the stolen flash-drive to the SHUSH handler, who stared at him, baffled.

“Agent Double Duck. You- you’re back already? We expected-” the agent coughed, cheeks going somewhat red as they scanned him up and down. Donald grinned, settling the voice changer around his throat. It was slightly less effective than the Barksian Modulator, but it didn’t require him to cough up a piece of glitching, sparking technology, so.

“Glad to hear I’m exceeding expectations,” he replied, and the agent’s face got redder. He hoped they weren’t too embarrassed; he only meant it as a joke.

“Ah, Double Duck. I see you haven’t changed a bit,” Director Ravenson called out as she walked into the room, arms crossed over her suit. Donald shrugged, not entirely certain what she was referring to and resolving not to let on.

“What can I say? Can’t mess with a classic,” he smirked, gesturing down himself lazily. Ravenson rolled her eyes, and gestured for him to follow her. He waved goodbye to the agent (Smith, he thought; he would have to confirm later) and trailed behind, glancing around. He hadn’t come to base for more than a briefing, and hadn’t had time to look around much.

To be honest, most of the place seemed the same. Same bland

hallways and blank doors; the only interesting things were the labs far below the building. Some of the art on the walls was different, at least.

Ravenson led them to a small conference room, where Donald settled in one chair and leaned back onto the rear legs, allowing himself to be a little annoying. He had earned it, he thought.

“So, is this where you tell me the mission was a test?” Donald quipped, grinning widely when Ravenson gave him a Look. He had gotten far worse death glares in his lifetime, he was basically immune.

“You haven’t been in the field in ten years, Double Duck. you can hardly blame the agency for confirming your current skill level. It was a real mission, if that makes you feel better,” Ravenson grumbled out, sitting primly across from him. Donald shrugged, letting his chair settle down onto the cheap carpeting.

“Sure, that I get. I don’t like being misled, though,” he let his tone settle into something more serious, “You’ve been trying to get me back onto active missions for years despite me being very clear with my answer.” He had thrown the last agent to approach him into Duckburg Harbor, in fact.

“So I am a bit surprised that you wasted my time on this training mission without an explanation; if I was a pettier duck I might just decide to stay inactive.” He caught Ravenson’s eyes and kept them.

She hadn’t been the Director when he retired, and they had never been on a mission together. She had started trying to get him to come back since she had taken over; he intended to find out why.

She met his eyes calmly.

“You used to be one of our best agents; I was willing to wager you wouldn’t tap out for something so petty, and we needed a new baseline.” She sighed, leaning forward slightly.

“We have fewer and fewer competent agents now, and there’s been movements in the underworld; you’ve noticed the increasing number of super villains in Duckburg and St. Canard?” Donald nodded; Gizmoduck and Darkwing were new, and somewhat inexperienced, but they were doing well and were clearly needed. Heroes didn’t tend to show up without cause, after all.

“We’re trying to give them some assistance in terms of resources and advice, but they’re stubbornly independent, and we’re lacking the personnel to do anything about it. We’ve also got some evidence that FOWL is trying to come back,” Ravenson explained, slumping slightly.

“Frankly, we need experienced agents, and better trained recruits. So yes, I wanted to test you, and I wanted to know if you would have the patience for it,” she finished, and Donald frowned at her.

“You want me as, what, a trainer?” He asked, scratching his head.

“Yes and no. I want you as an active agent completing missions as well, but I think our trainees would benefit from your expertise. Maybe on a trial teaching basis, and we’ll see if we can refill our ranks in the meantime. It would be a mixture of tasks,” Ravenson said, and Donald could tell she thought she had him. The issue was, she was probably right.

Teaching would be less dangerous, and occasional missions meant he was still helping, still doing some good.

And, selfishly, still proving to himself he could do things, that he wasn't as boring and useless as his family thought of him as.

He shook the thought away. His family just thought he wasn't good at adventures, they didn't think he was useless. His skills were as a parent!

(Except the kids were going to Della for things now)

He turned back to Ravenson.

"And the heroes? What's your plan there?" She frowned, and made a movement that resembled a shrug, but was closer to its quieter, more subtle cousin.

"We'll keep the lines open, offer intel and equipment when we can. Beyond that, they do seem to have the situation mostly in hand, and we have to focus on larger issues." Donald nodded; from her perspective, there wasn't much she could do unless they asked for help.

"You should offer them access to medical services; it'll be suspicious to go to the hospital with injuries from on the job," Donald said absently, tapping at his chin. "And partial access to the system instead of having to ask for intel. Sometimes they won't have time to ask, or won't realize they needed certain information and end up double working something. List them as honorary agents or something." Ravenson was staring at him. Donald stared back, baffled.

"Should I take that all to mean you're going active again?" She asked, aiming for smug and landing somewhere closer to pleasantly

surprised. Donald took a breath.

This moment, this felt significant; he could say no, or ask to be exclusively a consultant. It would be safer.

He thought about the rooftop again, and how he had felt like he was home again after so long away. Like he was himself again.

“Yes, I suppose you can,” Donald answered slowly.

Double Duck was once again an active agent.

He got home around noon the next day, giving himself some time to sleep on base before heading out. The Manor was empty, which wasn’t surprising under the circumstances.

He was a bit disappointed nobody had told him they had left on a new adventure, right on the heels of their last one. Usually one of the kids would have said something, but, well, they did forget sometimes. It wasn’t super unusual.

Donald realized he had expected something to feel different, when he got home. LIke his family would sense, somehow, his internal realizations and want to talk to him.

Silly, to think that. He let Duckworth know he was back and went to the houseboat.

He only lasted an hour, cleaning the already tidy boat and pacing the repaired decks, before he tore back to his car and drove to town.

Ducklair Tower was an imposing part of the skyline even now, and Donald's pass still allowed him into the elevator, taking him directly to the 151st floor.

He hadn't been here in a long time. The rooms were clean, and everything was in perfect shape, but without Uno's presence everything felt empty and dead.

The last time he had been active, there had been rising criminals and gangs, supervillains every week and an alien invasion to prevent. He'd worked hard to make this city safe, and had left it all behind when Uno was deactivated, leaving the rest to the police. But there were new crimes now, and new heroes. Donald had no interest in stepping on their toes, but he needed to make sure he was in the loop. Just in case.

SHUSH didn't know about his previous hero status; he had made some waves, and they reached out on occasion (he had been just as stubbornly independent as Darkwing and Gizmoduck were now), but he had largely operated separately from them, and when he later joined it was as Sgt. Donald Duck, not as Paperinik. As far as he knew nobody had ever put it all together.

Uno's computer system was just as convoluted and bizarre as it had always been, but it let Donald access the Duckburg PD system to read their reports on the new crime wave as it always had, when Uno was busy or Donald wanted to review things himself.

What he found was… strange. Ma Beagle was active as always, but her

crimes had grown (as had her family), and the surge of new supervillains surprised him. Duckburg was only so large, and there was a limit on the number of people in the world willing to go so far for their goals. Even fewer had the resources to build the necessary equipment. Most of these new villains were technology based; was there an issue in the scientific and engineering industries, that so many people had turned to crime?

That line of research only gave him more questions; at first glance he couldn't see the connection. The people that had been identified were from all over the country, from several universities and smaller companies. Some had been rejected from the scientific community for extreme ideas, but most of them were unknowns that hadn't made waves until they started weaponizing hurricanes. You would think that Glomgold at least would be hiring someone with that skill set. Someone currently employed in the industry might know more, and he made a note to ask Gyro.

No, scratch that, Fenton. Gyro had worked for Scrooge for years, and even if he did know anything, he wasn't likely to tell Donald, not without being suspicious. Fenton might know something though, and Donald had a sneaking suspicion that he would be more invested in the reason behind the crime increase.

After all, there were only so many people Gyro would trust in the armor he had created.

Darkwing was the bigger mystery, honestly, but Donald didn't typically go to St. Canard and had no real idea how long the man had been operating. His research didn't offer much information, only that the first major fight was against Taurus Bulba. Donald had no interest in unmasking either of them, but he wanted to make contact. To offer help if nothing else, though he expected that they both would see him as little more than a washed up has-been, if they even knew his name.

Of course when he had all the information he was able to find, he went home. He was retired, and unlike missions for SHUSH, he wasn't actually needed out there. Duckburg had a new hero, and Paperinik had been retired for over a decade. His goal was just to help them get set up.

And if he thought they should be coordinating more, that was Donald's personal opinion, nothing more.

But he only intended to observe and offer some advice, maybe help figure out why there had been such a change in crime rates all at once. He didn't intend to get involved.

In hindsight, he should have known that wouldn't be happening, but he didn't expect to get an unlisted call from Darkwing Duck.

"Is this Donald Duck?" A deep voice asked, and Donald groaned.

"Depends on what you want, and who this is," he growled out, and there was a long pause.

"What?" The voice asked, higher and more natural sounding now. Donald let out a low grumble.

"Look, text me or go away; I don't really have time for you to figure out how to understand me," he said, slowly, but he would bet that the person on the other end wasn't really listening.

“Wait! Look, I heard that you used to know Paperinik,” the man said, and Donald sat straight up. He pulled the phone away from his ear to stare, but it was still an unlisted phone number. Slowly, he brought the phone back to his ear.

“I don’t know where you heard that,” Donald said, trying not to snarl, “but I don’t talk about Paperinik. So if you’re a reporter or someone looking for gossip, you can go call Angus Fangus, I’m sure he would be happy to talk.” He reached for the end call button.

“No! I mean, it’s important I talk to Paperinik!” The man shouted. Donald scoffed audibly, and felt his face turning red.

“Sure you do. Look, he’s-” dead, Donald almost said, but then he paused. He took a breath to calm himself down, before he took a breath.

“Who is this?” He finally asked.

“This is Darkwing Duck. I need to talk to him about the Phantom Blot.”

Darkwing Duck

Well, this wasn't how he had expected to reach Darkwing, but whatever worked. Darkwing had given him a time and place to meet at, and asked for him to pass the information along to Paperinik, clearly ignoring when Donald said he couldn't promise he could still reach him.

The costume still fit like a glove, and the shield being back on his arm felt like he was regaining a limb he had been missing for years.

He didn't let himself focus on that; as great as it was to get back out, this was only an intel drop.

Still, as he landed on the warehouse roof, he couldn't help but think about how much he missed this.

He expected Darkwing to be early, and to try to get the drop on him. He couldn't blame him, Donald would do the same thing when meeting someone new in the cape.

In fact, he was doing the same thing; it was why he was there two hours early and was picking a perch to wait where he could see all sides of the building. He had pulled up a pile of news reports, and while most of them were vague they did show that Darkwing tended to approach from the air.

That, and the man had a flair for the dramatic, but he was basing his persona on a TV show hero. Donald could hardly blame the man for being a bit dramatic anyway.

He still got a laugh when Darkwing visibly jumped when Donald cleared his throat, half an hour before they were supposed to meet, as he jumped down from the air conditioner. Darkwing recovered quickly, spinning to stare at Donald, eyes wide behind the mask.

"Paperinik?" He asked, and something about his tone was… Donald couldn't place it. Surprised? Pleased?

He nodded.

"Darkwing. Heard you were looking for some information about Phantom Blot," Donald replied; his voice changer worked perfectly.

Just like all of Uno's tech always had.

"Gotta say," he continued, when Darkwing didn't immediately reply, "of all the reasons to drag me out of retirement, this wasn't on the list."

"How do I know you're really Paperinik?" Darkwing asked, a hair too fast and with an accusing stare. Donald blinked at him, considering.

"Not sure what you're looking for here, since we haven't met," Donald replied after a moment, considering him. Darkwing paused, and clearly from the look on his face he hadn't actually considered how he would confirm Paperinik's identity. His hand twitched against his belt.

"Er… right. Well, I suppose you have a good point, and I do trust our mutual friend that helped set up this meeting…" Darkwing said, trailing off. He seemed to have two tones; the dramatic hero voice, and a slightly higher, more natural one that was probably his real

speaking voice.

“Good, then let’s get into it; you wanted information about the Phantom Blot?” Donald replied, settling against the AC unit and crossing his arms. Darkwing nodded, settling back on his heels. He gestured one handedly, in a way that almost felt rehearsed.

“Yes; you took him down the first time, and there’s… been events in St. Canard, and elsewhere, that strike me as similar. I’m hoping you can shed some insight on if I have a copycat or if I’m just on a wild goose chase,” Darkwing explained, and now Donald could see the professional beneath the surface; someone who took their job seriously, no matter that he was based on a TV show.

“What kinds of events? Blot’s crimes were pretty broad,” he asked. More than broad; the Phantom Blot had had fingers in almost every crime in Duckburg for years, partially to camouflage his true intentions until the end.

Darkwing pursed his beak, tapping his fingers.

“I’ve confirmed break-ins at St. Canard History Museum, nothing missing but the targeted items were ones with spiritual or magical histories, based on the security tapes. No usable images by the way, either they need to upgrade their cameras or he’s using some kind of distortion tech. Increases in smuggling of antiquities, same focus. I know that the Blot had a thing for magic, which was why it caught my attention,” Darkwing explained, handing Donald a sheet that turned out to have a list of the targeted items. Despite his saying he was worried, he did seem a bit excited by the idea. His eyes were bright behind the mask.

“A copycat…” Donald considered the issue. The Blot’s plans hadn’t been publicized to discourage that exact thing, and Blot’s remaining

tech had been confiscated by Donald himself and stored at the 151st floor.

“What was the Blot’s original plan? Records show he was involved in smuggling, drugs, weapons smuggling, but your reports indicated there was a larger plot at work,” Darkwing asked after a moment.

“Using magical energy to build a doomsday device to take over the world,” Donald explained absently, skimming the list. The museum displays mostly weren’t truly magical; they were religious artifacts, and those lost their power when their worshippers stopped using them. The smuggled items held more possibility of being legitimate, but without being able to authenticate them there was no way to tell.

He was pulled out of his thoughts by a scoff, and glanced up.

“Magic isn’t real,” Darkwing told him condescendingly. Donald let his eyebrow rise.

“You an expert on that?” He asked, in the blandest tone he could muster. Darkwing gave him a smug look.

“Obviously what people call magic is just misunderstood science,” he told him, with all the confidence of someone who had never been challenged on his beliefs. Donald seriously considered lighting him on fire to prove a point.

“Sure, let me know when we have scientific explanations for Magica bringing everyone’s shadows to life and creating an army with them. After being imprisoned inside a dime for decades,” he said instead, because this wasn’t the time or place to get into a metaphysical debate about the energy of the universe.

He would be doing something later to disprove Darkwing, for his own sanity.

“Regardless, Blot’s technology allowed him to drain energy from magical artifacts and magical individuals into a power cell. All of his other crimes were to gather funding and resources for his world ending goals. He was in the process of building his doomsday device when he was stopped, and everything was destroyed. Has Blot had any visitors?” Darkwing was still giving him a dubious look, but thankfully he let the topic change.

“I haven’t been able to get in to see him, so I would assume no. Seems he isn’t allowed any visitors,” Darkwing answered, looking frustrated.

“Have you gotten any calls from any agencies?” Donald asked, already knowing the answer. Darkwing stared at him, clearly baffled, but nodded cautiously.

“A few; why, any one in particular I should be paying attention to?” He asked; Donald was pleased by his caution.

“SHUSH is the one I know; I trust them for intel, at least. You don’t have to use them, but I would ask if they can get you access to Blot for a talk. They should be able to get you in, or at least one of their agents. But if you do have a copycat they would have had to start from scratch, and he didn’t have any partners.” Donald waved the list.

“Mind if I keep this? I’d like to look into it myself,” Donald asked; he had most of the list memorized already, but he figured this way Darkwing would know he was poking around as well.

Darkwing nodded, fast.

“Yeah! Of course, please do. Let me know if you have any thoughts on it,” he agreed, almost eagerly. Funny, Donald hadn’t expected him to be so… enthusiastic at the idea. Still, Donald nodded, and tucked the list away. For a moment, they both stood there, and then Donald started to turn away.

“Wait! If- How can I reach back out to you? If something else comes up, I mean. Wouldn’t be opposed to getting some insight from a retired hero,” Darkwing burst out, stepping towards him.

“Er… you can reach back out through the same way you did before. Don’t think Donald would mind,” he finally offered, after a moment. Darkwing made an awkward face, rubbing the back of his head. His hat dipped to reveal more of his face, and Donald was struck with the thought that he looked somewhat familiar.

“I would, it’s just that- we don’t know each other, but we kinda do? I mean, in my civilian life. And it would be smoother if I didn’t have to contact him in both ways. Keep one life to one side, you know?” Darkwing explained, and Donald found himself in a pickle. He felt sweat bead up at his temple.

This was the risk of claiming that he was his own best friend! He couldn’t exactly say he had the same phone number as Donald, Darkwing wasn’t stupid enough not to notice, and if they did meet in civilian life (apparently they had some connection that Darkwing expected to potentially grow, that was interesting), the ruse would fall apart entirely.

“I don’t have a phone,” he blurted out. And wanted to slap himself. Seriously? When did he get so bad at lying?

Darkwing stared at him.

“No phone? Huh. Well, guess we’ll just make do. I can contact Donald if I need something, I guess,” he finally replied, wincing as he spoke like he had said something he hadn’t meant to.

“Right, yeah. Sorry about that. Maybe we can work out a better system,” Donald offered, rubbing his neck. He hadn’t had this issue before, it was strange; normally people didn’t want to talk to him.

“You should probably text Donald, though. And keep it as generic as you can, he has kids and they might see his phone,” Donald added, thinking of how much of a mess it would be if the boys saw anything hero related on his phone.

Wait, Dewey had met Darkwing, during the Taurus Bulba case; he’d seen the videos afterwards. Maybe that was the connection? But no, Dewey wouldn’t have been able to resist asking a million questions if he thought Donald knew another hero.

“Right, guy’s got an interesting voice. Didn’t expect that when I called him,” Darkwing mused. “He almost told me you were dead,” he added. Donald snorted.

“Yeah, he got a lot of reporters bugging him when I first retired. Surprised he didn’t just hang up when you mentioned my name.” Darkwing regarded him thoughtfully.

“How did he reach you? If you don’t have a phone,” he asked.

“Smoke signal,” he answered, as blandly as he could. Darkwing chuckled, waving a hand.

“Fair enough, forget I asked. Guess I’ll let you go for now. Oh! And let Donald know, if he needs to reach me, send the message through Launchpad,” Darkwing said, turning to leave. Donald nodded, while internally he fought back a laugh.

Launchpad, huh? Good for him, getting to meet the real-life version of his biggest hero. Living the dream.

Launchpad slipped onto the houseboat that night. As in, he actually managed to enter quietly, and startled Donald badly enough that he launched the spatula in his hand at Launchpad’s head, knocking off his hat. Launchpad only grinned, bending down to gather both lost items.

“Sorry Mr. D! Didn’t mean to scare you, just wanted to ask you about something,” He said, giving the spatula back (Donald put it in the sink and got another one out before he accidentally re-used it). Launchpad stepped into the kitchen fully and hesitated.

“Just Donald, Launchpad, I’m not your boss. Go and sit down; think I know what you’re talking about. Want any?” He asked, offering up a grilled cheese sandwich. Launchpad nodded, face turning nervous, while Donald made more food.

Launchpad’s face was well and truly red with tension by the time Donald sat down. Donald gave him a look, then pushed the plate closer to him. He didn’t move.

“Are you okay?” He finally asked, after another moment of silence went by. Launchpad nodded, but stayed silent. Slowly, Donald reached forward and grabbed a grilled cheese, watching the other duck from the corner of his eye, until finally Launchpad burst out:

“You know Paperinik!” Then covered his beak with both hands, eyes wide, looking around. Donald spared a glance around as well, but it was late, and the boys had talked about some movie marathon. There shouldn’t be anyone around.

“And you know Darkwing,” Donald replied, grinning at him. Launchpad nodded helplessly, wide smile spilling from behind his fingers, and a muted sound of excitement made it through. Donald snorted, shaking his head.

“I’m guessing that he already asked you to help play messenger?” He asked, and Launchpad nodded again. His hands fell away slightly.

“It’s one of the coolest things ever and you get to know a hero too have you ever gone on a mission with him I bet you would be a great hero Dewey always talks about how cool you are and what name would you pick if you were a hero mine would probably be Launchpad even though it’s my normal name but Darkwing is taken already-” he paused to take a breath, and Donald braced himself for another torrent of words, but he only finished with, “So, yeah. Normal amount of excitement here.”

Donald found himself laughing. Something about talking to Launchpad was just- soothing. He was such a cheerful guy, he made you feel like you could just breathe around him. Donald wished they could spend more time together, honestly, but Launchpad was the main pilot for most of Scrooge’s adventures, and he seemed too busy whenever Donald ran into him. He hoped the man’s new boyfriend appreciated him. Dewey had mentioned him dating someone in St. Canard now.

Wait.

Huh.

“Dewey thinks I’m cool?” He asked instead, trying to remember what else Launchpad had asked. Launchpad grinned and gestured widely with a sandwich.

“Oh yeah! He likes to talk about when you take him to weird shops around town, and going fishing on the houseboat. Huey does too, actually; I think they miss going out on the water, with the boat being in the pool and all. I get to talk to them more now when we’re flying, cause Della usually handles it,” Launchpad said, and part of Donald warmed while a sappy smile crossed his face. They missed going fishing?

He glanced around the boat, and put the thought away to consider later.

“To answer your other question, I haven’t gone on a mission with Paperinik, and I don’t know what I would pick as a name that isn’t taken,” he said carefully. Launchpad nodded seriously, folding his arms in front of him. He had half the sandwich hanging out of his mouth, tossing it up and eating it in one bite.

“Yeah, I always think ‘wow, that one was clever!’ when I hear a new hero's name. Dewey comes up with cool ones all the time! But his ideas usually use his name, I don’t know if you could use one…” he trailed off, tapping his chin thoughtfully. Donald laughed, shaking his head.

“No need for any of that, but if you want help coming up with one I can try. So, if I need to pass along a message to Darkwing, is it alright if I just text you? In case you’re on an adventure or something,” Donald asked.

“Huh? Oh yeah, sure. Is it alright if I come by, though? Sometimes?” And Launchpad slumped, just slightly.

“It’s just- being a hero is dangerous. And I’m all for it! But it’s hard not actually being there to help, all the time. I want DW to be safe, you know? But this is what he’s good at, and what he wants to do, and I don’t want to get in his way by being there all the time. And you’re a good listener, and I think you get it, right? Being on the sidelines, worrying?” Launchpad asked, his voice sincere and his eyes wide and worried.

And, well. Launchpad could be a bit dense sometimes, but there were times like this when he seemed to peer straight into your soul and pluck out your innermost feelings. Donald took a sharp breath, then another.

“Yeah, I get that. And you can come by whenever you need; even if I’m not here, the door is open.”

The Three Caballeros

The thing was, Donald honestly had always been busy. He had had a few jobs at any given time, trying to fill both his time and his bank account before one or another fired him, or had layoffs, or turned out to be a front for the mafia. Job hunting was its own job, and Donald had worked in that industry for years. You name it, Donald had seen it, and had worked at most companies in Duckburg in some capacity.

Well, not McDuck Industries; he refused, even if he thought for a moment Scrooge would allow it. He seemed convinced that Donald working for him in any capacity that wasn't $1 an hour grunt work would somehow make him lazy. Donald had done a few jobs with him as a teenager and vowed never again.

But with the SHUSH missions he could quit those extra jobs; one mission covered his minimal bills for a few months at least, and the instructor pay they had offered was, frankly, excessive considering he hadn't even started yet. Apparently they paid him regardless of if he was actually teaching at the moment; he suspected this was uniquely for him to try and keep his availability open, but Director Ravenson simply called it retainer and hadn't let him argue.

Most of it was going to the kids' college funds; Webby's was a mutual effort between him and Bentina. The Saberwings had been surprised when he had offered for both Lena and Violet (he had to explain that Lena's had been started before they adopted her, and with Violet going on adventures she was basically family, so of course she was included now…)

The girls had found out, somehow, and Lena had been torn between her normal attempts to appear disinterested and bursting into tears. Violet had been stoically thankful, explaining that she intended to earn scholarships to New Quackmore but appreciated his efforts regardless.

He'd have to keep an ear out when Violet started applying to school in a few years; he could at least put in a good word for the specialist programs if she wanted to apply, right? That wasn't over reaching. Probably.

With the additional free time, he'd finished all the repairs on the houseboat, sought out the kids to spend time with them, asking about their adventures and what projects Louie Inc. was working on. He got mixed results; sometimes the kids were eager to talk, bursting with stories and ideas and bouncing off the walls in their excitement, and others…

Donald was good at telling when people wanted him to leave. He made sure they knew where he was, kept his phone charged and his doors open, and left when it was obvious they wanted him to go.

But without the constant worrying about the kids (he never stopped, but it calmed, the more adventures that went smoothly, the longer between accidents and injuries), with a good paying job that he wasn't worried about losing, he found that he had more free time and less stress.

And he was bored. Donald had been a soldier in the Navy, a superhero, a secret agent, a mage of another world's kingdom, a member of the Three Caballeros, and a parent. Raising the triplets while juggling jobs and getting rid of agents trying to recruit him and magical misadventures calling his name, he had been too busy to realize all that he had given up.

Mourning Della and the loss of his relationship with Scrooge had happily filled the small gaps there were in his mind.

And now, well, Della was back, and the pain of her disappearance a healing scar. Scrooge and he were still distant, but to be honest they had a lot of ups and downs over the years, and this was no worse than when he had enlisted. He abruptly had the time and energy to really think and he was finding how much he missed his own calls to adventure.

When was the last time he did anything for himself, anyway? Taking the mission for SHUSH was an example, he supposed, and taking the call from Darkwing.

He had planned that prank on Scrooge with the Cabs, he supposed; all that trouble and lying to see if he could get the old man to pay for a meal.

Getting Huey in on it had been a master stroke; the Improv Theater badge was more than earned, and Huey had confessed later he had had fun, until the killer plants.

Those had not been planned; José had apologized profusely for not realizing it. Panchito had thought it was hilarious, especially when Donald had managed to kill parts of it with his voice.

But back to his point, he was sitting around with all this free time and nothing to do, and realizing that he had given up more than he had thought when he started raising the boys.

They had been worth it, he was still convinced that they had needed the stability he had tried to give them more than they had needed to grow up with Scrooge in the middle of his own breakdown. Donald could hardly have gone on missions and adventures when they were waiting at home, couldn't do that to them. Not with the ever-present risk that one day, he wouldn't come back.

He tugged at the chain around his neck, where his Caballeros amulet hung. Maybe he should have moved the boys to Mexico like Panchito had offered; maybe he just missed his friend and should text him instead of thinking about what-ifs and maybes.

Texting Panchito was always a gamble; either he answered right away or wouldn't reply for three days; there was no in-between. Still, he tossed out a 'how's it going?' message and set his phone to the side.

Today the family was cave diving for some lost idol or other. He honestly hadn't been paying attention when Scrooge explained at dinner; Donald had been spared any updated questions about what his new job was, and he figured soon everyone would forget they hadn't asked yet and make up their own answers. He debated saying translation work if anyone asked, which wasn't completely incorrect; he did do occasional translations for New Quackmore's Languages department.

His phone rang; Panchito's grinning face lit up the screen.

"Donal'! It is fantastic to hear from you, I was just thinking about how much I missed you!" Donald laughed, leaning back against the couch and relaxed.

"You say that every time we talk, Chito," he pointed out, but he couldn't fight the grin on his beak.

"Si, si, it is always true! Every day I do not see you I miss your presence and your voice!" Was the enthusiastic reply to that.

"I miss you too. Every day," Donald said, too quiet and too honest, but

tonight was the night for truth and painful realizations.

“I wonder what would have happened if I had just taken the kids and run to Mexico, joined you at your parents farm,” he confessed, the words slipping off his tongue before he could pull them back. God, Panchito had probably called to chat, not get into Donald’s deepest regrets.

“Donal’, I wonder that too,” Panchito said after a long moment, more serious than Donald had heard him in a long time. “I miss seeing you and José every day. But you wanted to be near your tío, and I do not think you regret that.” And no, he didn’t. Donald sighed, letting his head fall back. His face was hot.

“Yeah, yeah. You’re right, I’m just in a mood. Too much time on my hands, is all, lets sad thoughts in,” he sighed, and Panchito laughed.

“You, with free time? That doesn’t sound like my Donal’!” Donald choked on a laugh, face going hot.

“Yours, huh?” He asked; Panchito let out an affronted squawk.

“Of course, and I am your Panchito! We are bonded! Have faced terrors great and small! Even when we are apart, we are together, no distance or years will change that,” he declared; Donald could practically see him gesturing widely, and let nostalgia wash over him.

“You, me and José, forever,” he agreed, softly.

“Squawk, crow, quack!” Panchito started, and Donald finished “I’ve got your back.” He sighed, relaxing fully. Funny that he didn’t notice

the tension he carried until it melted away.

“So, does this mean you are also missing my handsome face?” Panchito asked, grin clear even in his voice, but Donald could tell the question was meant to lead to something. He replied yes anyway, waiting.

“And José, you miss him as well, of course. He is easy to miss, despite his bright colors,” Panchito continued, and Donald laughed.

“Yes, yes, of course I do! But where are you going with this?” He asked, and there was a pause.

“Well, you see, we have been talking, José and I. About how we are a trio that has been apart for so long. And well, getting citizenship has become much easier over the years…” Donald knew that, he had poured over the process years ago, knew the changes, had tracked them just in case, but…

But.

“Are you serious? You’re thinking of moving here?” He asked, sitting straight up in a shot, tension in every muscle.

“More than thinking about it, mi amigo! It is nearly done! José is moving his, ah, base? To Duckburg Airport, and I can find work somewhere, I am not picky! We thought, we will start at the cabana and see from there. But we planned to talk first, I assure you,” Panchito added earnestly, but Donald was too busy focusing on the early parts to focus on that.

“You’re coming here?! Oh boy oh boy oh boy!” He yelled, and if it resembled a grito if sung by a particularly ill blender, there was nobody around to hear besides Panchito through the tiny speakers.

“Ha! I cannot wait to see you in person! We will all dance and play music together into the night, and we will get to see your sobrinos! Play threesies! Cuddling while watching telenovelas! Popcorn fights!” Panchito enthused, while Donald laughed.

He’d need to prepare; needed to make sure there was space on the boat for if they came and visited, set up times to go to the cabana and-

“When?” He managed to ask, caught between anxiety and joy, wanting to do flips and start stress cleaning all at once.

“In a few months, I think; me, I don’t have much to pack, but José has more things to do, and we wish to travel together. We will keep you up to date!”

Donald mentioned that José and Panchito would be coming back to Duckburg (well, New Quackmore), at breakfast the next morning. It was one of the few times that Bentina ceded ownership of the kitchen for Donald to cook, so he was making pancakes for the kids. Scrooge chose to still have his porridge, and had eaten and gone before the kids came in.

Moments like that reminded Donald that, despite them making good progress, still had a strained relationship. Scrooge had insisted on making his own breakfast since Bentina was taking the opportunity for a morning workout, and Donald had to bite his tongue to keep from asking if Scrooge had so little faith in his cooking abilities.

It wasn't just the fact that Scrooge never ate anything Donald made, it was how he looked when Donald offered, how insistently he said he could handle it himself. How silently he sat, in the dining room despite nobody else being up and the kitchen having open seats, and how quickly he left when he was done.

Della was with Penumbra this morning, so it was just the kids this morning, syrup and butter flying, Dewey insisting that they should have sprinkles and Huey asking for strawberries, Louie half asleep in his chair, threatening to face plant into his plate with every moment. It was loud, and it was messy, and Donald was smiling from ear to ear as he cooked.

He was also glad they were eating in the kitchen ("we need to be as close to fresh pancakes as possible Uncle Donald!"), because this would be a mess to clean up later.

"So I heard from Chito and Zé that they're planning on moving up to New Quackmore in a few months," he said, sliding another batch of pancakes onto the center plate; they were all quickly snatched up by Webby.

"Really? That's cool," Huey said absently, as he poured syrup onto his plate; he was very particular about the ratio of syrup to pancake. Dewey didn't respond, trying to sneak a few bites off of Webby's plate when she wasn't looking, and nearly getting stabbed for his efforts. Louie gave him a thumbs up, moving to drag his plate away from Webby and Dewey's ongoing fight.

Donald shook his head with a grin, tossing more pancakes on the grill. No matter that there were plenty of pancakes, the two kids had to fight for the best ones, or the freshest ones; he'd learned to just let them be. No harm no foul.

“If you make any more of a mess you’ll be cleaning the kitchen for Mrs. Beakley,” he did warn, when they threatened to leap onto the table. Dewey immediately settled down, Webby a moment later.

“Yes Uncle Donald!”

“So, wait, they’re both moving here?” Dewey asked a moment later, mouth full of food and blinking like he had just processed what Donald had said. “Why?”

“Plenty of reasons. They wanted to years ago, it’s just easier to get citizenship now than it was when we were in college,” Donald half explained. In truth, he had no idea how to tell the kids that they were coming for him. How do you explain that your old exes (except they hadn’t really broken up, just acknowledged that they couldn’t keep up long distance) were moving back to, well. He didn’t know for sure that they wanted to rekindle their old romance, but he hoped. Panchito had certainly implied it, but he hadn’t been able to talk to José yet.

“Are you guys really going to get your old band back together?” Webby asked, twisting to look at him in curiosity. Donald laughed.

“Probably not! That was mostly a joke to wind up your Uncle Scrooge, he never could stand our playing,” he explained, chuckling at the memory. Their band had never been meant to be a serious gig, mostly they played little parties and small off clubs for the fun of it, but Scrooge’s reaction to finding out Donald had made a band?

Well, honestly the fight that had resulted had been explosive, and so painfully ridiculous after Donald had no choice but to laugh. Scrooge had been convinced that Donald intended to run off and live in a van playing music in bars forever; it was half the reason he had bought the houseboat and sailed off with the Cabs in the first place, honestly.

Those had been some of the best years, sailing around and playing gigs at tiny bars along the coast.

"So you wouldn't have left us to go play with them?" Louie asked, and he was clearly trying to sound disinterested. Donald sighed, and turned to face the table. Four sets of big eyes met his.

"No. I couldn't be away from you all that long," he answered, looking each of them in the eyes to make sure they understood. Louie still looked iffy, huffing and turning away.

"I love all of you," Donald continued, "and I will always be here. Maybe not living in the Manor, but I will not leave you. No matter what."

Louie looked him in the eye, and something vaguely resembling a smile crossed his face, and he went back to eating. The other three kids nodded, decisively, and Donald nodded back, satisfied.

"So, besides that song you played while we fought the plant thing, we haven't actually heard your music? The Three Caballeros, I mean," Huey said after a few minutes. Dewey looked up from his sword (butter-knife) fight with Webby.

"Huh, yeah. Do you guys have any actual music somewhere?" He asked, and Donald snorted.

"Yeah, we've got some CDs; they're on the houseboat if any of you want to listen," he offered, "but after we clean up from breakfast, or Bentina will kill me."

Donald honestly hadn't expected them to remain interested once they were done eating, but he found himself setting up the CD player on the deck of the houseboat with four ducklings in tow.

"We didn't have the best recording equipment at the time, so these have some background noise," Donald explained as he hooked up speakers. Louie had already asked why he didn't play the music from his phone and was now staring at the number of wires needed with horrified fascination. The deck was clear so they could all move around, but the space was small. Donald thought absently of the music room in the Manor, which he doubted had been used once since he moved out, but didn't want to risk running into Scrooge and getting to hear another lecture about wasting his time or how bad Scrooge thought the music was.

He started the CD, and was blasted into the past so quickly he almost looked around for Raider. With his eyes closed he could almost smell the old cabana; he could even hear Ari's song in the background while 'Blame it on the Samba' started. The Three Caballeros (band) had made music in almost every genre, just to mess around, but this was one of his favorites.

He opened his eyes. The kids were all clustered close, and seemed surprisingly invested, heads bobbing, feet tapping. But…

Donald jumped forward and grabbed Dewey's hand, pulling him into a spin. Sambas were meant to be danced to!

"Blame it on the rhythm of the samba!" He crowed along, while Dewey laughed and danced with him. His steps didn't match, and

Donald's toes were stomped on, and Louie was definitely filming on his phone; Donald tossed Dewey in the air and caught him before he could botch the landing and laughed.

The song ended, and a salsa started instead (this had been their dance mix, Donald remembered), and he spun Dewey away to dance on his own and took Webby's hands instead. She giggled, eyes bright, and was less clumsy than Dewey, but she had no idea where to put her hands, so he held them and let her twirl and twirl until that too ended, and she stepped back and pushed Huey into him.

"Since when can you dance?" Louie called from the sidelines; Dewey and Webby were doing some crazy movement that could be a dance or some kind of war ritual, always hard to tell. Donald turned the volume up.

"Not really a skill that comes up, Louie," Donald called out, while Huey tried to match his steps and movements; he was too stiff, but he was smiling, and Donald's tail was tapping along with the beat; the sun was shining, and they had pancakes for breakfast. It was a good day.

The next song started, and Huey backed off, snatching Louie's phone and pushing him forward.

"What, hey!" Louie yelled, but didn't hesitate to grab Donald's hands and carefully copy him. He seemed the most nervous, so Donald slowed down a bit, let him set the pace.

Too soon, the CD ran out, and while Huey dove to start the next one, Donald leaned against the railing and caught his breath.

"Seriously though, you dance?" Louie asked him, leaning next to him.

Donald grinned at him.

“Sure, I was a worthless layabout that was going to run away and start a band; course I learned. Most of it I learned from Chito and José, but I learned ballroom dancing from Grandma Duck,” he explained, thinking fondly of spinning around the old barn, standing on Grandma’s feet and feeling like he could feel the music in his veins.

“You can ballroom dance?” Webby asked, perking up. Donald nodded.

“I’m a bit rusty, but I can. Had to, with all the boring parties Scrooge used to drag us to as kids; dancing meant I didn’t have to talk to anyone.” He had never had a shortage of partners either; Della had teased him about it, but he hadn’t minded, even if most of them were older women.

“Could you teach me??” Webby demanded, jumping up and grabbing his collar to stare deeply in his eyes. “Please? I’ve always wanted to learn!” Donald caught her and helped her land back on the deck, letting his mouth quirk in confusion.

“I- sure, I would love to. Your Granny hasn’t offered that lesson?” He asked, and Webby shrugged, going back to the probably-a-war-dance with Dewey as another song started up.

“She offered, but, uh, it’s probably easier to learn with a partner. And Granny is a lot taller than me…” she explained with an awkward shrug; Donald chuckled at the mental image. Yeah, Bentina dwarfed most people.

“Just let me know when, we can actually use that ballroom for something,” Donald promised, and was rewarded by a blinding grin; he could almost see the sparkles in her eyes.

“Hey, Unca Donald? You mind if I post this online?” Louie asked, holding up his phone; the earlier recording played in a short loop. Donald shrugged.

“Go for it; tag Panchito and José if you do, they’d love to see it,” he replied, figuring his friends would get a kick out of it. So would Ari, if he had a phone. He’d have to show him next time he visited.

Louie nodded absently, already tapping away. Donald’s phone pinged, and when he glanced at it found a text from Launchpad. Wary, he opened it, glancing at the kids to confirm nobody could see his screen.

He needn’t have bothered though; the text just said ‘ *can i join you???* ’

‘ *you’re always welcome* ,’ he sent back, shaking his head, and a moment later a loud whoop echoed from just behind the boat, and Launchpad came around the corner, almost leaping onto the deck of the boat. He didn’t get a chance to say a word before Dewey was dragging him around the deck in a dance.

They had to spill onto the lawn when Bentina came from inside, curious about the noise, and at that point the kids had wholly taken over the speakers, selecting from Donald’s extensive collection. Some were ones he had recorded (he’d burned almost anything he made to CD back in the day), and somehow most of those copies had survived. Beyond that, well, he had a lot of music he liked to listen to.

“Is this a live recording?” Bentina asked, pouring glasses for lemonade for everyone while Launchpad tried to show the kids how to breakdance (Donald expected someone to be injured soon). He tilted his head to listen, then laughed.

“Yeah, this was a show I used to do with an old friend. Dueling pianos; we played for a while at a few night clubs while I was in college,” Donald explained, “Daffy’s boyfriend at the time offered to make a recording of our last show before they moved to Burbank.” Bugs had been oddly nervous that night, trying to make sure he got the best possible audio. Afterwards they had gotten absolutely hammered and ended up crashing at the cabana for the night.

“Daffy?” Bentina asked, but was interrupted by Launchpad calling from the lawn, “Hey Double D, we should play together sometime! I have a saxophone in the garage!”

They might have spent the day on the lawn, but Scrooge ran out yelling about some long lost tome he had found a clue about in Switzerland, and Della arrived back and dragged Launchpad to the plane to start prepping, so soon it was just Donald and Bentina sipping lemonade, the sounds of a fiddle playing from the CD player.

“I’m surprised Scrooge didn’t invite you along this time. He spoke of it recently,” she commented after a moment. Donald glanced at her in surprise.

“He only wants me along to carry things, can’t imagine what he would need me for on this one,” he joked, and she chuckled. When the CD ended, she packed up her tray and went back inside, and Donald packed up the speakers and went onto the boat.

On his phone was a new SHUSH mission.

The First Double Duck Mission

Donald was already on base when he got a text, going over the new mission (another breaking and gathering type mission, but this time he was leading a trainee), so he was only able to check that it wasn't an emergency before he was off to Texas.

Surprising that Mickey was reaching out, sure, but he would have used the Kingdom Hearts system if it was serious, so Donald put it out of his mind.

The new trainee, a young chicken going by Agent 330, was excited, and twitchy. Donald had had to stop them from giving away their position twice already.

"There is no rush on this," he said under his breath, as the guard that had almost caught them finally walked by, "but if we get spotted that intel is going to be useless. We need to be slow."

"But isn't it better to get in fast? There's less time to get caught if we're not here as long; there's a formula for how much time in a base versus risk for getting caught-" and Donald had to drag him back into the shadows right as window opened above their heads, someone yelling out across the courtyard for 'Sven' to get their ass inside.

"If they even suspect there's been a breach, they'll change their dates and times to be sure, so no, we need to not get caught. What are they even teaching you? And sure, if we spend all day here we're likely to get caught, but we're for sure going to be seen if you walk into someone's view because you were focusing on your feet or formulas!" Donald hissed; 330 was one of their senior trainees, he shouldn't be this clueless!

He made a note to get on the training regime soon; he wanted to see what they were teaching, if this was one of their almost-graduates.

The compound wasn't a tricky place to get into, the key was staying unseen while they found the right building. There was a main building that had probably once been a large family ranch, and was now surrounded by a handful of smaller outbuildings Their intel said that the computer room was in the main building, through a second floor window. Thankfully, most of the activity in the compound seemed to be centered on the other buildings, where based on the sounds there was some kind of game going on.

330 gave him an embarrassed look, but finally settled in behind him, bouncing on his heels, and soon enough they were at the computer system; a laptop in a cramped office. They were after the accounting details of the group operating officially as shipping livestock; SHUSH suspected their cargo was weapons instead.

"Uh, we have a problem," 330 then said, because Donald had clearly angered a deity in his past (did taking the last Pop-Tart from Xandra count?). He turned to look at the screen.

That… those were not weapons.

"Those are people. They're trafficking people," Donald breathed, staring at the cages. He was going to be sick. Donald had seen a lot of awful things in his time, but this was a new low, and something he had hoped to never have to encounter.

330 gulped, eyes darting across the screen.

"Not quite," he choked out, "they're hostages. Some kind of political scheme, I haven't read it all…" He said, leaning closer to the screen,

squinting.

“Location, we need a location,” Donald whispered harshly, “or send the information to SHUSH right now, we need to move before any of them are-” Sold, or killed, he thought, but couldn’t force his tongue to commit to it. 330 nodded, and tapped away with more urgency. Donald paced to the doors, then the windows, listening closely; they could not afford to get caught now.

There was the risk that they would kill their captives to avoid getting caught.

“Okay, okay, I got it! All their data, I sent it to SHUSH and saved a copy. I’ve covered our tracks, no-one should be able to tell we accessed the system,” 330 whispered excitedly, twisting to look at him. Donald let out a short breath.

“Are they holding everyone here?” He asked. He had to know.

They needed to get out, and they couldn’t raid the place with just two of them. But…

But.

330 nodded, looking nervous and ill.

“Yes; they’re supposed to be in one of the buildings at the center of the compound,” he confirmed. Donald sighed, and nodded. He led the way out of the compound in silence, not wanting to spend another moment worrying they could get caught. He couldn’t help turning around to look at the building.

“Good job kid; you handled yourself well on the way out,” Donald said quietly, when they were outside and away. Just over the hill was their vehicle, half hidden in the weeds. “Now wait here, I just need to check something. If I’m not back in half an hour, or if you hear anything crazy, head out, and I’ll get my own ride out.”

“What? We just got clear, and we got what we needed!” he exclaimed, sounding baffled. Donald gave him a small grin.

“Don’t worry, this hopefully won’t take long,” Donald reassured him, then glanced at his watch. Check in wouldn’t be for a few hours, SHUSH wouldn’t be expecting a call yet.

“What are you even doing?” 330 called after him, but Donald had already slipped back towards the compound.

The building where the captives were held was one of the smaller buildings, close to the center and unfortunately close to what turned out to be a number of people playing an intense game of poker.

“This is a bad idea, Sir,” 330 informed him, hidden entirely in the shadows of the roof Donald was crouched on. Donald nodded.

“You should leave,” Donald told him seriously. He was given a rather pointed look in return.

“We both should! SHUSH has the information on this location, they’ll plan a proper raid. One with more than two agents with minimal weaponry!” Donald shook his head, and glanced back at the guards.

There weren't many, and most of them were distracted. Unfortunately, they were still sitting near the building Donald needed, and he didn't know if anyone was inside.

He waited, silently, while 330 huffed and stayed behind him.

Soon, one of the men stepped away, Donald was guessing to pee or take a smoke break. He waited, until the dog was out of earshot of his group, leaning against a shadowed wall.

He dropped like a stone, silently and heavy, when he was struck in the neck. Donald set him to the side, laying him on his side, deep in a dark alcove of the building, and checking his pockets. One gun, a small radio, nothing else. He pocketed both, then made his way back to the roof.

"There. Now we have another weapon," he told 330, who stared at him like he was some strange, never-before seen creature.

"You're, what, planning on slipping in dressed as one of their own, and, then what? Sneak out everyone inside? We have no idea how many people are inside! Or how many guards!" Donald nodded. That was true. And why he had no intention of pretending to be a guard. They all seemed to know each other, for one, and for another, no guarantee that he wouldn't be asked to actually work.

Besides, he didn't want them to see his face if he could help it.

"Yes, and we don't know if they would notice a new guard or not. So we're not doing that," he explained, making his way along the roofs to the opposite side of the compound, then to the building next to their goal. 330 let out a disbelieving sound.

“You’re insane,” 330 whispered, looking briefly down at the guards just below them.

“In my experience, nobody ever looks up,” Donald murmured when they reached the top, keeping low and scanning for cameras. There hadn’t been any so far, and that remained the same here. Donald wondered if they were avoiding getting hacked or if they were just too old fashioned to bother.

Nobody had noticed them, or the missing guard so far. There were no lights on in the make-shift prison house, Donald noted, as they had now circled the whole building. Which probably meant that nobody was inside besides the captives.

Unless this was a trap, Donald mused, looking down again at the guards, trying to decide if they were being suspicious, if their movements were too lax, if any of them were pointedly not looking at the roof, any sign of a trick.

Nothing.

Donald wasn’t convinced. This all seemed too easy, which he advised 330 of. He was given a dubious look back.

“We’re perched on the top of a building that potentially has a dozen kidnap victims, and there are plenty of guards that will happily take us out given the slightest wrong move; what about this has been easy?” He asked in a very low tone; Donald was spared from answering by conversation below.

“Hey, where’s Jim? He was supposed to be having a smoke, not taking

a nap!" An irritated voice called out. Donald perked up, watching as people started looking around. Nobody seemed too suspicious, merely annoyed.

Nodding to himself, he gestured for 330 to stay and whispered, "Stay here unless you have to move, I'll be back in a second."

Then he darted towards one of the outer buildings, completely dark. This one housed the actual weapons being shipped, but all Donald needed was privacy, some scraps of paper, and a lighter.

He didn't need a huge fire; it would probably be a terrible idea to have large flames near this building full of guns and explosives. He just needed the glow to be large enough to be eye-catching. While the fire grew, he locked up the buildings and made his way to the roof.

"I found Jim! He's, uh- I think he's having a seizure!" Donald said into the radio, in a panicked hushed voice. A moment of silence, then a cacophony of voices started yelling back.

"What?! Where are you? Get him on his side so he doesn't choke, or is that vomiting, oh jeez," one voice managed to say over the others, frantic, while the noise grew below, shouting for calling an ambulance and replies about how stupid that would be, requests for more information.

Donald rattled off a series of convoluted directions, sounding distracted and confused, sending them in the vague direction of the unconscious guard. After a moment, the half dozen guards that had been playing cards were gone,

330 stared at him as he landed. Donald winked, then made his way closer to the correct building, dropping down to peer into a second

floor window. Nothing but an empty room, so Donald slid the window open and slipped inside. He signaled for 330 to stay on the roof as look out, then repeated the instructions out loud when he only got a blank stare in return. Right, adding hand signals to the lesson plans.

The radio chirped at him again, but there were so many voices talking on it now, trying to decipher his earlier garbled directions that it wasn't immediately clear that he was no longer replying. He turned the volume down, and made his way into the darkened building. In the hallway, there were stairs going down in one direction and another door in the other. Opting for the door first, he cracked it open.

And immediately had to leap back from a chair being swung at his head. Yelping, he backpedaled to the wall, squinting at the duck that had leapt at him, still brandishing the chair. She raised it to swing again, and he saw behind her were the other captives, barely visible in the dark. He held up his hands, leaning further back.

"Wait, wait! I'm here to get you out," he hissed, and she paused, looking down at him.

"There's a fire by the weapons building!" A voice yelled from the radio, and both of them looked down at it, still on Donald's belt. He winced.

"We don't have a lot of time, I'm an agent sent to get you all out, but we have to hurry before they deal with the blaze," he whispered, keeping his hands up. The woman gave him a long look, then slowly put the chair down. Her wrists still had rope burns, and the chair on second look was broken.

"If this is a trap…" she growled at him, but in the end, none of them had a choice, so he nodded once and started cutting people loose.

While the captives (one other woman, two men, and five children) hovered and whispered to each other in encouragement. All of them were awake, which was something of a blessing and a curse in one. Donald let them stand and shake out their limbs, taking the moment to open the window and look at the roof. 330 startled at the sight of him, then gave a thumbs up and gestured towards the door. He slipped back inside.

"Coast is clear, we're moving." Their procession moved as fast as they were able, with Donald clearing the hallway, then the stairs and finally the ground floor. The building was empty, but the table and chairs inside implied it might be for meetings. When they reached the door, 330 opened it, and led the way out. Donald let him, picking up the smallest child (a dog of maybe four, sucking her thumb and rubbing her eyes), and leading another by the hand.

The night air was thick with the smell of smoke, and the sounds of yelling and crackling of fire covered the crunching of their footsteps on the gravel. 330 led the way in silence, face grim and tense, unlike the eagerness of earlier in the day. Their procession moved as fast as it reasonably could, stopping in the shadows and watching each window and door with fear. Donald longed to hold his gun in one hand, just to feel more prepared even if it wouldn't mean much if they were caught, but the child he was leading was clutching his hand like a lifeline, and he couldn't bear to do it.

The group moved as one, and breathed together, holding stiff and still beside each wall and breathing out as they passed each open area, as each guard ran by without seeing them, yelling about water and fire extinguishers. Some were still trying to find Jim; they passed his still unconscious body across a wide courtyard, just visible in the shadows.

Breathe in. Dart across the opening towards the last outbuilding.

Breathe out. Enter the dark shadows cast by the lamps outside the courtyard.

In. There were people just past the building, they'd gotten close to the fire and the panicking gang members and guards were trying to put out the blaze that had clearly gotten out of control.

Out. Two of their group crossed the last gap towards the scraggly trees and low brush.

In. The kids were across, 330 leading them.

Out. The other adults, one taking the girl Donald held, the other leading the little boy. Neither made a peep, eyes wide and terrified.

In. Donald looked across, waited for a moment, almost stepped forward.

Out. He did hate to leave something unfinished.

In. He drew the guard's gun.

Out. He waved frantically at 330 to go, as he lingered by the trees. The trainee gave him a panicked look, hesitated, ran towards the rest of the rescued hostages.

In. He measured the distance between the group and the fire.

Out.

In. Aim.

Out. Fire.

Run.

Funny thing about fire; a rapid increase in available oxygen will take a spark and make a flame. And if it was already a flame?

There was a flash, the sound of shattering glass, and a whoosh of air, and a burst of heat that nearly bowled him over as he ran, no longer worried about being quiet or unseen; at this point they had much larger priorities.

“What did you *do* ?” 330 demanded as he joined the rest of the group, all running in the direction of the truck. Donald glanced behind him.

Yup, that fire was going to be seen from the nearby town at this point.

“Made sure they didn’t have anything left,” Donald huffed.

The truck was packed tight, each seat taken by an adult and everyone but Donald (who was driving) carrying a child in their lap. Sniffling and quiet thanks were all Donald could hear from behind him; he thought some of the former captives were in shock. It had been that kind of night, even before the explosion.

Loading them all into one vehicle had been a thing of beauty, honestly; the last time he had had a car loaded so fast, he was taking the boys to a theme park.

Huh, Webby had probably never been; that might make a fun trip later.

For now, he was driving as fast as he dared towards their base, while 330 called in to report the change.

The phone picked up after one ring. The already silent car went somehow quieter.

“Agent 330, I do hope you’re calling to explain why your recon location is currently on fire,” their handler, Agent C4 (how anyone took him seriously was a mystery), said in a suspiciously calm voice, audible through the car.

“Uh, well sir, Agent Double Duck and I-” 330 started, and C4 interrupted.

“Yes, I heard you were on a mission with Agent DD. Hand him the phone,” C4 demanded. 330 glanced awkwardly across at Donald, who reached out and took the phone, driving one handed.

“This is Double Duck. Would like to advise that I'm currently driving nine rescued individuals to the nearest base, we’re not seated legally due to having over the recommended number of passengers, and our recon location is confirmed to be on fire. A lot of fire. And I don’t want to get pulled over for talking on the phone, so please be quick,” he quipped, because sometimes he liked to be a nuisance. 330 snorted

a laugh, then covered his face in horror. He heard a nervous giggle behind him.

“You were supposed to get intel only, Agent DD. Please explain why you went off mission parameters.” C4 had a way of sounding furious with a completely even tone of voice, Donald remembered that from the last time he had worked with the agency. Donald had plenty of experience in people being furious with him.

“The parameters didn’t account for live hostages on site,” Donald explained shortly, glancing at the girl in 330’s lap. They didn’t have her name yet, or names for anyone in the truck. He didn’t even know whose families were being threatened, and hoped someone at SHUSH was working on that instead of bothering him.

“And why did you not call in to get approval for a change in your mission?” C4 asked, and yeah, Donald remembered this too. This was why he usually preferred to operate as Paperinik, back in the day. Nobody except Uno asking him why he made certain decisions.

“I have civilians in the car, C4, is this the time?” He snapped, squeezing the steering wheel in a white knuckled grip. He couldn’t afford to lose his temper here.

“Yes, I think now would be a good time, considering we now have to schedule raids on the remaining bases and hope that the intel you did bother getting to us is still accurate when we arrive. Please explain why you couldn’t be bothered to call in regarding your mission change.” Donald gave himself a moment to let his head fall back against the headrest.

“Alright. A, because calling in to explain the change in status and request a change is something you do on a month-long mission, not a four hour one. That process takes time and paperwork, and you know

it," Donald bit out. 330, silent beside him, was shaking. Donald glanced again at the child in his lap, and bit back the rest of his retort.

"You can wait for my formal report for the remainder of the explanation," he said instead, "Now. We're arriving with nine civilians that will need medical care, and someone to contact their families and get them home. Are those resources available at the nearest base, or do we have to drive somewhere else?"

"The procedures exist for a reason, Agent-"

"Do we have the necessary resources at our closest base," Donald snarled over him, "or should we choose another location?"

"Agent DD-" Donald hung up.

"Hope they're prepared at Houston," he said cheerfully, handing the phone back to 330 without looking.

"Um, sir?"

"Don't call me sir, DD or Double Duck is fine," he said, in a calmer voice, focusing on the road to keep his rage in check.

"Um, Agent DD, is that- I mean, are you going to get reprimanded by Agent C4 when we arrive?" 330 asked, and it was a fair question. Donald shrugged, but was spared from answering the truth (that he truly didn't care; they had wanted *him* back, after all, not the other way around), by someone speaking up in the back.

"Is that guy's name seriously C4? You have an agent called C4?" And

the tension in the car cracked like an egg. Donald laughed.

“Rumor is he bribed the Personnel Dept. to get that code,” Donald revealed, reveling in the quiet laughter from behind him. 330 gave him another look, which he ignored.

“And you’re Double Duck?” Another voice asked, and Donald tossed his head side to side in a sort-of motion.

“Officially it’s DD, but Double Duck is what everyone calls me instead. DD just isn’t as catchy,” he explained. Or as memorable; if an agent lasted long enough, they usually got a nickname, even if that name was longer than the original. Something about being assigned numbers and letters instead of a name inspired agents to regain some kind of individuality whenever possible.

“Didn’t you get that name from a princess?” 330 asked, a small grin on his face. Donald gave him a smug look in return.

“Technically she was a duchess,” he replied, not bothering to hide the pride in his voice.

“How did *that* happen?” the woman that had swung a chair at him asked, leaning forward to peer at him. The raven in her lap, almost a teenager, grinned at him as well. Donald sighed. The remainder of the drive was telling the long, and utterly ridiculous, story of finding a missing duchess, fighting a sorcerer, and getting her to her family halfway around the world.

Debrief in Houston

The Houston base was not technically in Houston. Really, it wasn't even that close; it was called that because it was both in Texas and because SHUSH's spacecraft were primarily housed there. The entrance involved driving a convoluted route through dozens of side roads in a specific pattern, which then opened a tunnel entrance. Rumor had it, a very lost driver had made it in completely by accident once, but nobody would confirm it.

The sun was rising by the time Donald had finished this process and driven into base, where they were quickly swept up in a crowd of responders. Medical got first dibs, so by the time Agent C4 had reached them, beak pulled into a deep scowl, each of the rescued individuals were already surrounded by medics and one agent each, confirming their identity and who their primary contact was. They had only just managed to get everyone inside the small medical center, and with all the personnel, the room was packed to the brim.

"Agent C4, glad to see you made it," Donald called out, and a few of their new friends from the ride looked up eagerly. C4 paused when he noticed the attention, just for a moment, before continuing his path.

"Agent DD. Rest assured that you will be answering to the Director about this entire incident," C4 said in a cocky tone, arms crossed, radiating confidence. Donald rolled his eyes.

"Sure, C4. Hey, since you're here, want to help with getting everyone identified and sent home?" He gestured widely around the room. C4 glanced briefly around, then turned back to look at Donald.

Who had taken the opportunity to step right up to him; he was rewarded by a small jump and smirked. It was not a pleasant expression.

“If you’re looking for the rest of my explanation, here it is: people come before intel. What, exactly, do you think weapons dealers do with hostages when their bases are raided? Hostages they took from politicians and law enforcement to hold as collateral for their weapons moving smoothly. What do you think happens to hostages if those weapons never make it to their buyers, Agent C4?” Donald asked, voice no more than a low hiss by the time he finished. He leaned in close, closer, and let the smirk fall off of his face.

“I changed the parameters so that we wouldn’t get nine innocent people killed while I drove away, and I’ll take whatever reprimand the Director thinks that’s worth,” Donald finished, and then he stepped away.

“Are you really so naive? You think the agents sent in to raid the other bases weren’t also placed in danger?” C4 demanded; they were gaining a lot of attention now, but Donald couldn’t find it in himself to care.

“Of course they were. At least they signed up for it! Between guaranteed deaths of unarmed innocent people, and potential danger for trained agents going in with weapons and intel on the situation, I would still make that call. And if an agent is hurt on those raids, I have to live with that. But that *is* my call, and it would be again. Now, are you planning to assist on debrief, Agent C4, or can I continue doing my job?” C4 stared at him, expression somewhere between disbelief and rage. The medical center was silent.

“Well, I do suppose that answers my first question, Agent Double Duck,” Director Ravenson said from behind Donald; he debated slamming his head into the wall.

“Director Ravenson,” he replied without turning to look at her; C4 looked smug, “I didn’t realize you were on base or I would have

reported in." Behind the other agent, Donald could see heads turn, curious and nervous. 330 looked ready to faint.

"No matter, I'm aware that Medical likes to get their hands on you first," she replied, and Donald thought he could hear the smile in her tone. "I assume anything pressing was told to Agent C4 when he called you?" Donald considered the question, as he turned to face her.

She was smiling.

"I advised of the number of civilians needing immediate attention and assistance in getting home, but we weren't able to fully discuss the need to raid the remaining bases," Donald answered after a moment. "Agent C4 inquired about the change of mission parameters, but as I didn't think that conversation was time-sensitive, and we had civilians with us, I opted to end the communication and focus on returning to base."

"Director, if I may?" C4 offered, looking displeased by the obvious change in the room's atmosphere. Ravenson barely gave him a glance.

"You may not, thank you. Agent 330? If you would join us please," she commanded, and walked out of the room without waiting for an answer. Donald glanced around the room, confirmed all their rescues seemed calm and were receiving care, before he followed her out. C4 jerked to follow him, although Donald was personally uncertain if he was meant to or not.

330 caught up in the hallway, flushed and terrified, his eyes wide. Donald gave him a quick grin, but couldn't say anything else before they caught up with Ravenson in a meeting room. Despite being a spy agency, with weapons and experiments and a whole host of other operations in the same building, bases like these always seemed to be 80% meeting rooms.

Donald took a seat first, leaving one next to him for 330 as far from Ravenson as possible. C4 sat across from him; by the look on the Director's face, he had not needed to follow them.

"First, Double Duck, please give me a brief summary of the mission," she requested calmly, folding her fingers in front of her on the table. Donald sat up straight.

"We were able to infiltrate the compound without issue and reached the target computer system. Once 330 was able to get into the system, we became aware that there were hostages being held on site. Out of concern that they would be harmed if we moved forward with the planned raids, I made the decision to go in and remove them from the situation. I caused a minor distraction to scatter the guards, so our target building would be clear, then lit a fire to gather the guards in one location while we evacuated the building. 330 created the path to escape, and was an asset in getting everyone to safety.

"Once we got the civilians clear of the base I blew up the munitions building, to help distract from our escape and to take out the majority of the on-site weapons," Donald summarized.

Both C4 and 330 stared at him, but Ravenson merely nodded. Donald was used to the basic nature of debriefings; Ravenson would ask any immediate questions she had, then read the full report later. She then turned to 330, who sat up straight.

"Please give your assessment, Agent 330," she commanded. 330, if possible, stiffened even further.

"Um. As Agent Double Duck said, we were able to get into the compound without being caught. I. I was able to get into the computer

system, where we found the photos and video showing the hostages. Double Duck got us out of the compound before going back in for the hostages, and I followed him. He, uh, knocked out a guard, then used the radio to convince the other guards there was a medical emergency so they scattered from their posts. Then set the munitions building on fire. He went in to find the hostages while I planned a path out, and we walked everyone out while the guards were distracted by the fire. I didn't see how he blew up the building, I was leading the group towards our vehicle," 330 answered, a bit too quickly, but fairly confident. Donald would give him points for it, he looked like he was about to faint at having a meeting with the Director.

"Thank you. Double Duck, would you say that there was a pressing need to remove the civilian hostages from the situation immediately?" Donald nodded.

"And was the fire and resulting explosion necessary in your escape?" Donald shrugged slightly.

"We could have feasibly escaped without the fire, but given we had children to rescue I wanted to ensure that the guards were as far away as I could manage and too distracted to pay attention. I determined that it was safer for us all to light the fire. The explosion itself was intended to destroy the remaining weapons and cover our escape," Donald explained. Ravenson nodded, once.

"Thank you for completing your mission, Agent 330, Double Duck. In future, please attempt to keep us up to date on changing mission goals. I realize your time table on this mission was limited, however it does seem to me you had time to do so," she said crisply, and gave them both an approving look.

"Director, if I could interject-" Agent C4 started, and Ravenson turned to him and lifted one brow.

“Agent C4, I do not recall asking you to join this debriefing. What, exactly, do you feel the need to tell me that couldn’t wait for a better setting?” Ravenson asked blandly. C4 gave her a tense smile.

“Our procedures are clear that all agents must get clearance to change their mission parameters, no matter the circumstances. Surely Agent DD is still required to follow procedures, even in rushed circumstances,” C4 insisted, leaning forward with a convincing smile. Donald rolled his eyes; 330 pursed his beak in concern.

“As Agent Double Duck has explained the rushed nature of the situation, no.” Ravenson looked like she was ready to snap.

“But, Director, I really must insist. Agent DD should be held to the same standards as the other agents of our agency,” C4 continued, and Ravenson gave him an irritated look.

“Agent Double Duck is a senior agent, and is already approved to make changes as needed; we agree that informing the mission control is optimum if possible, but as they were on enemy territory at the time, I am accepting that neither Double Duck or 330 were able to call in. If you have any other complaints please direct them to my office at a later time, Agent C4,” Ravenson said in a no-nonsense tone that made Donald snap upright.

C4 shrunk backwards slightly, blinking. Ravenson stood up to leave, and Donald didn’t waste time following suit. 330 stumbled to follow him.

“Wait, senior agent? He’s been retired for a decade!” C4 called in shock, but Donald ignored him and stepped up to catch Ravenson. 330 lingered slightly, before sliding along the hallway to walk towards the medical center.

“If I may, Director Ravenson, I wanted to talk with you about something else,” Donald said quietly, glancing at the meeting door where C4 was still standing. She glanced that way as well, then nodded.

“Agent C4, could you give us the room?” She asked, and sat back down before he could respond. C4 huffed, but withdrew. Donald waited until he had left, closed the door, and slumped down in a chair.

“He’s going to be an issue,” Donald observed. Ravenson gave him a bored look.

“He’s one of our best agents, but he is very by the book. I doubt you’ll win him over with your usual methods,” she replied. Donald, who had no idea how he had won anyone over, ever, shrugged and let it go.

“So. The trainee agent,” he said instead, and Ravenson’s face turned serious.

“Was there an issue with his performance?” She asked, but somehow Donald didn’t think that was quite the question she was asking. He shook his head.

“His performance was fine under the circumstances, that isn’t my concern. He isn’t trained on hand signs and he doesn’t know the basics of infiltration. Why was he in the field without that training?” Ravenson sighed.

“The focus in training has been on electronic methods of spy work. Hacking, primarily. Our agents are focusing on cyber threats and techniques, not old fashioned breaking and entering, and we have few agents left that are still trained in those methods. Yes, I know,” she

replied to Donald's expression, "but I am still trying to build up our staff, and those are the resources we currently have available. I can't make more diversely trained agents appear out of thin air." She snarled for half a second before her face cleared.

"You have me," Donald replied, before he could really think about it. He blinked in mild surprise at what he had said. They had discussed him offering occasional training, but he had just effectively volunteered on a more permanent basis.

Ravenson was staring at him.

"You want to take over our training program?" She asked, almost uncertainly; the tone didn't suit her. Donald considered, then shook his head.

"I'll help redesign the curriculum, and I'll teach what I can that you can't cover. I hardly need to be in charge to do that," he pointed out, and Ravenson gave him a dry look.

"You'll need the authority to make those changes," she pointed out, and waved a hand when he opened his beak. "Authority granted. I'll send you the current curriculum, let me know what changes you're making. We can move the training center closer to Duckburg, I know you want to be near your family at all times," she said.

Donald was left feeling like he had just been run over, but after a moment considered the idea, and found himself surprisingly interested. He had never considered teaching before. And who knew, maybe he would be good at it.

Nothing but Flights

Donald's trip back to Duckburg was boring; a private flight from SHUSH with just him and the pilot; 330 had been left at Houston, and the hostages safely returned home by the time he and Ravenson left their second meeting. She had insisted on getting a rough idea what he planned to change, to alert the other trainers and staff at the Duckburg base of the changes coming. By the time they had wrapped up it was almost evening, so he only grabbed his bag and jumped on the next flight.

It was there, sitting in a semi-comfortable seat and tapping his fingers on the arm rest in boredom that he had time to check his texts. He still only had one from Mickey, which was unusual outside of Kingdom Hearts issues. But if it had been, there would have been the key emoji at the start.

And in all honesty, he would have probably been sucked into a wormhole to Disney Castle or Radiant Gardens by now; the text was generally a forewarning to get somewhere else.

Mickey: hey pal! Saw that video of you and the kids dancing around the other day, it was great to see you all having fun! when are you guys gonna come visit, huh?

Donald laughed, tapping an answer before setting the phone to the side to take a nap.

Donald: how about when you move somewhere with better traffic?

Mickey hadn't seen the kids since they were toddlers, and he doubted they remembered it; somehow, meeting one of Hollywood's biggest stars seemed like something they would have mentioned. He

constantly debated telling them that story, but it seemed self-serving to mention for no reason.

He didn't get an answer, but the text had arrived before his Texas mission and it was currently very late at night, so he didn't think much of it.

He did notice that his Tweeter app had a shocking number of notifications on it, but ignored it. He had only installed the app at Louie's behest, and only used it to occasionally post about his kids or weird facts about various topics he found interesting. For the most part he just got messages from his friends, so his guess was that one of them had posted some long thread about something that he could read later.

The flight was short, the drive quiet, and finally he got home. As was his usual habit, he ducked into the house when he arrived, even though it was now only an hour before dawn and everyone was asleep.

Or should be, he corrected, when he found Scrooge sitting in the kitchen, staring into space, a cold cup of tea sitting full in front of him. Donald paused in the doorway.

"You're up late," he commented, and Scrooge jumped a mile, staring at him like he had seen a ghost.

"Ah! Donald, lad, didn't hear you come in," he blustered, downing the tea in a gulp, then wincing.

"And not quite, just up early. Got to seize the day!" Scrooge continued, while Donald watched him blankly, the bag weighing on his shoulder.

“Uncle Scrooge, it’s nearly three in the morning,” he pointed out. Scrooge blinked at him, then the clock on the wall.

“Well.” He said, clearly stuck. Then he whirled to point at Donald.

“Well, what are *you* doing awake then?” He demanded, like it would somehow explain his own actions. Donald shook his head, wishing he had just walked past the door.

“I just got back from work, I like to check on the boys and let Duckworth know I’m home,” he explained, shrugging the shoulder with the bag strap over it. Scrooge’s eyes darted to the bag briefly.

“Right, yes, you were at work. Good, always good, you’ve always been a hard worker…” Scrooge muttered to himself, and he seemed to curl into himself slightly. Donald blinked at him, baffled. Scrooge had called him a lot of things over the years, but hard working was not one of them.

Looking him over again, Donald noticed bags under his uncle’s eyes, his hunched shoulders, his darting gaze and distracted speech.

“Are you okay?” He asked, and Scrooge jumped again, like he had forgotten Donald was there.

“Of course I am! No need to worry lad, just a spot of restlessness, have to always be ready to go on our next adventure!” Scrooge enthused, eyes wide and almost manic. Donald took half a step back.

“Don’t suppose I can talk you into joining us on our next one?” Scrooge continued, and Donald took another step back, eyes widening in alarm.

Scrooge didn’t like him on adventures; he said he was a downer and a fun-suck when he came. The last time he had invited him along for any reason besides being a pack mule, he had been a teenager.

Scrooge didn’t notice Donald's reaction, laughing to himself.

“Ah, yes, it would be a great time, have the whole family on another adventure! The kids have been wanting to have you along with us for a while,” he continued, and Donald relaxed. The kids wanting him along was a different story. Letting out a breath, he shook his head.

“It’s hard to get time off work, you know that,” he explained (although Scrooge could and did take time whenever he liked), “If you give me more time to prepare I could probably make it work.”

Donald knew it wouldn’t happen; Scrooge rarely planned an adventure more than a few days in advance. While Donald’s new job would probably give him enough flexibility to jump on one last minute, half the time he only found out the kids were going anywhere when they were loading up the plane. The only reason he knew consistently where they were going was because Launchpad and Beakley had agreed to pass along any travel plans in case the kids forgot.

“Right, yes, of course,” Scrooge agreed, stuttering to a stop like he had run out of fuel. Donald took a step back towards the doorway.

“I’m going to check on the kids and head to bed,” he said, feeling the awkward weight of the room drag at his shoulders. “Can you let everyone know I’m home when they get up?”

Scrooge took a breath, like he planned to say something important, before he sighed, drooping.

"Of course. I think Beakley plans on making porridge for breakfast, if you're awake by then," Scrooge offered. Donald nodded, already knowing he wouldn't be. He hadn't slept since the flight to Texas.

The boys were asleep, of course, sprawled out on their bunks. Dewey snored, Louie with the blankets wrapped around him like a burrito. He spent a short moment taking it in, their quiet breaths and the calm of early morning before dawn.

Then he left, glancing at Webby's closed door before heading to his boat, then his hammock and sleep.

The thing was, in Donald's family, there were a lot of emergencies. He'd been trained from his teens to react to loud noises of all kinds by shooting awake and darting towards the noise before he was even aware of it.

So when there was a banging noise on his door, he only became aware of where he was when he had ripped the door open, still wearing his pajama shirt and squinting at the sun.

"Unca Donald!" There were his kids, yelling, halfway across the yard and running fast. Behind them the Sunchaser was parked on the driveway, Launchpad hauling supplies onboard.

In front of him, fist raised, was Della, who grinned at him.

“Donald! Glad to see you awake! Come on, we’ve got a prophecy scroll to get!” She declared, grabbing his wrist and pulling him towards the gangplank. Donald dug his heels in, more out of instinct than conscious thought.

“What?” He managed to ask, baffled, while Dewey and Webby reached the pool first. They bounced up to the boat, eyes bright.

“Unca Donald! You’re back in time! Come on, come on, we’re going to Italy!” Donald stared at them, while Della continued to pull at his arm. More awake, he focused on Huey, who had arrived and was catching his breath.

“Sorry Unca Donald, I told them you were sleeping!” He apologized, while Louie arrived last, managing to look like he hadn’t run across the yard. Donald pulled his arm free, shaking it out while Della grumbled at him. Dewey jumped into his view.

“Come on Unca Donald, we’re going to find a scroll that predicts the end of the world! It’s gonna be *great!”* He crowed, cartwheeling around the deck of the boat. Webby bobbed on her heels, hands clasped in front of her and staring at him with big eyes.

“It’s not your fault, Huey,” he replied absently, glancing into the boat briefly to check the time. It was only 7 AM. He’d worked with less. He sighed.

“You want me to come with?” He asked, finding himself surprised at their enthusiasm. Huey gave him a tentatively hopeful smile, while Louie leaned against the railing casually, watching him closely.

“I mean, we know you didn’t get much sleep last night, but you haven’t been on an adventure in a while, and you could sleep on the plane?” Huey offered, rubbing his elbow with his opposite hand and giving him a pleading look. Dewey and Webby had stopped flipping around to stare at him as well, and Louie stared at him from the railing and-

Look, Donald could stand up to puppy eyes for extra desserts and toys, but them wanting to spend time with him?

He was weak. And judging by Della’s grin, she knew he was going to break.

“Give me five minutes to get dressed,” he answered with a tired sigh, but smiled when all four kids (plus Della) cheered.

“I’ll get you some coffee!” Huey promised, while they all ran back to the plane, yelling that he was coming to Scrooge and Launchpad. Before he closed the door, he saw Scrooge look up in shock, and for a moment their eyes met across the yard. Donald stepped inside before he could think about it.

Armed with his travel bag (mostly medical supplies) and a thermos of coffee, Donald made his way onto the Sunchaser with a yawn.

“Glad you’re joining us Double D!” Launchpad told him with a grin as he walked onboard. Donald blinked, thankfully remembering his initials and Launchpad’s normal nicknames before he asked why he was being called his spy name.

In hindsight, the fact that SHUSH had given him Agent DD as a codename was baffling. Although, there were a lot of ducks with the last name Duck, so there was that.

“Schedules finally lined up,” Donald said with a shrug, stowing his bag and taking a long gulp of coffee. It was blisteringly hot, but that helped wake him up further. Della waved from the cockpit, Dewey in the copilot chair and wiggling with excitement even while reading through the pre-flight checklist.

“You’re not flying us?” he asked Launchpad curiously; he didn’t necessarily trust Launchpad’s flying, but he was still employed as the pilot, so that was strange. Launchpad shook his head.

“I’ll take over if we need, but the plan is I fly us back, and let Della and Dewey take us out there. Which means I can chat with everyone on the way out! I don’t always get to do that,” he enthused, but Donald got the impression he would have preferred to be flying anyway.

“Well, I’ll be happy to have your company,” he replied instead, and was rewarded by a blinding grin. Donald took another gulp of coffee and choked on it when a hand slammed onto his back, spewing it out in a spray. Thankfully Launchpad dodged in time.

“Donald! Glad to have you onboard! Thought you would take the chance to sleep in,” Scrooge declared loudly, while Donald caught his breath. Scrooge moved on towards the cockpit before Donald could respond, which was probably for the best. He shook his head, turning back to Launchpad and waving off the concerned expression.

“How’s your boyfriend?” He asked, hoping to change the subject. Launchpad blinked at him, confused.

“Huh?” He asked, head tilting to the side. Donald frowned.

“I’m sorry, I thought- you and Drake? Dewey mentioned it, I must have misunderstood,” he stuttered out, feeling incredibly off-kilter. He could have sworn Dewey had said dating, but clearly that hadn’t been quite right.

To his surprise, Launchpad’s face cleared with a bright grin.

“Oh! Yes, dating. Drake and I are dating!” He said it with such surprise that Donald almost wondered if he had temporarily forgotten; he seemed delighted by the reminder.

“I just didn’t realize you knew; Dewey knows cause Gos told him, and Gos knows cause Drake adopted her, so I guess I didn’t think anyone else would know?” Launchpad explained, gesturing around vaguely with one hand. Donald nodded, and gave him a wry grin.

“Yeah, if you don’t tell Dewey to keep something a secret, he won’t. Most of the family probably knows,” Donald explained, and Launchpad chuckled shyly, rubbing the back of his neck.

“You think I can introduce him then? I’ve been wanting to, but it’s kinda hard to figure out how,” he asked. Donald nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes, of course you can! Maybe not all at once, if that would help? It would be less overwhelming,” Donald offered. Launchpad lit up.

“Oh! Maybe we could bring Gosalyn and the kids somewhere? I bet Gos would love to meet Webby!” Donald agreed right away, and Launchpad tapped out a fast text on his phone while Donald suggested Funso’s as a location.

“And you’re coming too, right? I’ve been wanting you two to meet for a while,” Launchpad asked eagerly, still typing away, so he didn’t see Donald’s shell-shocked expression.

Somehow, he hadn’t thought he was included in the list of people Launchpad wanted to meet his boyfriend.

“Of course, I’d love to. Just let me know when Drake is free so we can set something up,” Donald managed to reply. Launchpad nodded, squinting at his screen.

“Hey, do you know what-” but he wasn’t able to finish before the rest of the kids were running back onto the plane and the cargo doors were closing. Donald was swept up in the kid’s excitement, enthusiastically telling him about the scroll, written by an anonymous Roman prophet, which supposedly was a completely accurate set of predictions about the modern day.

“According to legend, if you read it it will tell you exactly how and when you’ll die!” Webby exclaimed, waving her hands. Louie, sitting next to Donald, shuddered. He surprisingly didn’t have his phone out, and was instead listening to Webby’s excitement at their possible death predictions with concern. Donald gave him a slight bump with his elbow.

“In my experience, these things are usually overblown. Probably won’t be accurate, just vague enough to sound good afterwards,” he said, quietly enough that Webby didn’t catch it. Louie gave him a slightly grateful look. Huey glanced up from his notebook.

“Isn’t it supposed to predict the end of the world? I thought this was more of a large-scale prediction,” he protested.

While Webby and Huey debated the various legends and myths surrounding the scroll (Donald had not caught the name of it, and didn't recognize the legend), Donald glanced around. Dewey was glowing in the front, grinning from ear to ear as he helped fly. His hands were steady, and Della's face couldn't be prouder. Donald felt a smile stretch across his face.

On the other side of the plane, Scrooge was pouring over the map to the scroll's supposed resting place, a small temple up a series of cliffs. Launchpad was standing with him; he looked like he was trying to help plan the route, but whether or not Scrooge was even listening to him wasn't clear.

Scrooge looked up, and their gazes caught; Scrooge's expression was unreadable, as his eyes darted from Donald, briefly to the kids, and back to him. Donald frowned slightly, tilting his head, but Scrooge looked away before he could try to sort through his expression.

"Oh, Louie, a friend of mine saw that video you posted, texted me asking if we wanted to visit. Think you kids would be interested in a trip to Burbank?" He offered, gaining the attention of all three kids at once.

"Ooh! Could we go to see the Walk of Fame while we were there?" Huey asked curiously.

"Or the *Queen Mary* ! It's a haunted ship!" Webby added, then backed up a bit, hands falling.

"Or, I mean, you probably just meant the boys, right?" She continued, less enthusiastically. Donald gave her a confused smile.

"Of course I was including you," he assured her, "We would just need

to check with your Granny first."

"And I wouldn't mind seeing the *Queen Mary,* " he added thoughtfully, tapping his chin in thought. "Mick might come with us, he always liked things like that." More he liked to try to help spirits move on if they were actually there, but the point stood.

Webby's eyes looked about ready to fall out of her head, they were so wide and bright. He was reminded of an anime character, and wondered if she could grow eye sparkles by sheer force of will.

"How about visiting some celebrities' homes?" Louie added, leaning around to grin at Donald, rubbing his hands together. Donald laughed, shaking his head.

"We'll see! I'd need to actually set up a trip, then we'll plan what we're doing while there, alright? And we need to see what Dewey would like to do, I don't want to distract him right now," he added, gesturing pointedly at Dewey, who was still flying the plane and either couldn't hear them or was tuning them out.

Besides that, Donald thought to himself, the kids might not want to see other famous people's homes when they realized who, exactly, they were visiting.

He should let Bugs know if he was going to be in town, or else he and Daffy were likely to hunt him down for revenge if he was in Burbank without visiting.

He made a note in his calendar to text Mickey back when they landed, but unlike SHUSH planes he had no signal here, so it would have to wait. Probably until they got back, if he was being realistic, since they weren't landing in a very populated area.

“Hey Unca Donald, what’s your new job anyway? I don’t think you’ve said,” Louie asked out of nowhere, interrupting Donald’s train of thought. He blinked down at him, before catching the slightly panicked looks of Webby and Huey. His eyes narrowed slightly in suspicion.

“They asked me to train new staff at a research company,” he said after a moment, because it was mostly true, and would explain his new training schedule. “This last job will probably be the last time I have to travel for a while, they want me working a more consistent schedule in Duckburg.” Huey and Webby let out a breath. He stared at them, baffled.

“What’s going on?” He asked, pressing his no-nonsense tone, and Huey cracked like an egg.

“We couldn’t remember what you were doing for work, and I swore you had told us when you first got the job! So we were trying to figure out how to ask without you realizing we didn’t know, and Louie just *said* it instead!” He explained rapidly, looking frantic. Donald stood, dislodging Louie, to grab Huey’s shoulders and forcing him to meet his eyes.

“Huey, it is fine. I don’t remember if I told you about this one. I go through a lot of jobs,” he said slowly, calmly, while Huey’s breathing caught and stuttered.

“But we should be listening to you! You were excited about this job, what kind of family are we if we don’t know things like where you *work* ?” Donald shook his head.

“Busy ones, that’s all. There’s no shame in forgetting something, Huey,

even if I did tell you. I'd prefer you just ask instead of worrying about it," he told him soothingly. In all honesty he didn't know for sure if he had said anything, or if he had banked on nobody asking. People rarely found Donald's work interesting.

Or his life in general, but he dismissed the thought to focus on Huey, who was staring at him with guilt and hope at once.

"So you're not disappointed? Or hurt?" He asked, in a small voice.

"No, I'm not. It's really not a big deal, Huey, and like I said, I don't remember if I said anything anyway," he tried, but Huey didn't look completely calmed down yet.

"But that means we never bothered to ask! How long have you even been working there, and we never asked what you were doing?" Donald gripped Huey's shoulders as tight as he dared.

"It's still not a big deal. I am not mad. I am not hurt, or disappointed. Sometimes we forget to ask others about their lives, or their day, or forget details they told us. It's not something to worry over, just ask the next time you talk to them," Donald said clearly, carefully.

Huey could be occasionally anxious about things, especially a self-perceived failure at something he thought he should have handled. It wasn't unusual that he had latched onto this as something he had done incorrectly; still, it bothered Donald. Huey, however, seemed to accept his words and went back to talking to Webby about the legend they were chasing. Donald settled back into his seat, staring at Louie in confusion.

"Want to give me any hints?" He asked, not really expecting an answer. Louie shrugged, leaning back onto his shoulder and seeming

to settle in for a nap.

“Huey’s been in a weird mood the last few days, not really sure why,” Louie offered, which Donald was willing to bet wasn’t all there was to the issue. Determined to get to the bottom of it, he decided to pull Huey aside after the adventure. Surrounded by people that could easily overhear wouldn’t be a great way to get Huey to open up.

Satisfied with that plan, he leaned his head against Louie and let himself slip into an uneasy sleep.

Adventure Time!

Della and Dewey were able to set the plane down near the temple, but it still took a nearly hour-long hike to get to the cave entrance that the temple was built inside. Since the plane had set down without crashing, Launchpad joined them, and ended up carrying the majority of their supplies. Donald trailed at the back of the group with him, chatting absently while making sure nobody ran off the path to try cliff diving or free climbing up the rock.

Scrooge led the way, spry as ever, excitedly telling Webby and Della the history of the cave. Webby, as usual, was enthralled despite clearly knowing most of the information. The boys were clustered in the middle, talking about the latest episodes of *Ottoman Empire* .

The temple was built into the side of the mountain, with the frieze and metopes carved directly into the rock and the columns made from the same stone. It wasn't a particularly large temple, the entrance was only just high enough for Launchpad to walk inside without ducking, and the interior was mostly rough stone. The floor had been smoothed over but otherwise the space was largely unworked.

Donald looked around at the lack of interior sculptures and decor with interest and mild concern. Temples with little decoration tended to be death traps, in his experience.

They had to pull out flashlights to continue forward, and Donald let himself linger near the rear of the group, keeping an ear out for any suspicious sounds that might indicate a trap triggering. Della and Scrooge were jockeying for the front of the group, competing with the kids that were all trying to race ahead. All except Louie, who had slowly fallen behind until he was walking with Donald and Launchpad, casually looking around at the lack of interesting scenery.

At the end of the first chamber, a set of wooden doors were set into the stone. They were worn and decayed but surprisingly sturdy, needing both Donald and Launchpad to be moved. Donald honestly expected opening the doors to trigger something, but nothing happened.

"Whoo!" Dewey cried, and Donald instinctively caught his collar as he tried to run into the darkness. Dewey gave him a sheepish grin when he looked up, and pulled out his flashlight. Webby, only half a step behind him, looked eagerly over his shoulder.

"Aye lad, you should know better than to run in without checking for traps!" Scrooge admonished, elbowing his way to the front; Donald shook his head and backed off. Della grinned widely as she passed.

"Come on Don! You could look like you were having fun!" She teased, while he rolled his eyes.

"I've gotten four hours of sleep, I'm not even awake," he grumbled, but less irritated than he expected. She stuck out her tongue at him.

"Aww, did the old man not get his afternoon nap?" Donald flipped her off, pretending he didn't see Louie's wide eyes and delighted grin. He'd seen and heard worse anyway, Scrooge was awful at making sure there were no kids listening to him.

Della laughed at him and moved along; Launchpad had to duck down to get through the doorway with his bag of supplies. Donald had no idea what, exactly, was in said bag; they weren't expected to be here more than a day after all.

The next chamber was slightly larger, but still undecorated and only one door, on the other end. Along the walls were the broken remains

of some wooden chests, but a cursory search showed they were empty, the decayed strands of old bolts of cotton the only remaining contents.

“So, is it normal that a temple holding cool stuff has no decoration or traps?” Launchpad asked, as they made their way to the next doorway. Donald shrugged.

“Depends; sometimes people keep their treasures in really simple looking places so nobody thinks there’s anything valuable there. Or the temple could have been looted,” he added thoughtfully, glancing around at the plain walls. Launchpad looked around at the rough stone and odd angles of the walls, all of which looked like no work had been done on them at any point.

“Huh. I guess I figured it would look more like the other temples we’ve seen,” he finally replied, shrugging. Donald gave him a wry grin.

“Disappointed?” He joked, but Launchpad shook his head.

“Nah, it’s nice to have an easy one every once in a while!” he said cheerfully, and Donald suppressed a wince, wondering if they had just been jinxed.

This doorway led into a long, winding corridor that was cast in strange shadows and eerie silence. Even the kids were quiet; the atmosphere was heavy and uncomfortable, the walls tight and claustrophobic. Scrooge stayed out front, and was picking up speed the longer they went along, as though desperate to get through this section of the trip.

Donald glanced to the side, and saw some Roman writing on the wall, almost skidding to a stop to look closer.

Do not continue. At the end of this road lies only doom.

Charming. He pointed it out to the group, only for Scrooge to scoff and continue on.

“Now lad, we’ve had plenty of warnings carved into walls before! No need to worry about every little thing we find written down!” He declared dismissively, while Della giggled and made a quiet comment about ‘Downer Donnie.’ The kids looked between the three of them uncertainly, before Dewey gave a laugh.

“Yeah, no worries Unca Donald! We’re pros at this!” He crowed, and marched after Scrooge. The other three followed suit, leaving Donald alone at the wall. Launchpad gave him a nervous grin and continued on.

Donald let himself fall behind, scanning the walls for anything else.

Ruin lies ahead.

Death and despair await you.

Run while you still can.

Besides the messages, there were thick gouges along parts of the walls, like someone (or several people) had thrown weapons against the stone.

Donald dwelled on them as he continued to walk along. Nothing else caught his eye, but he did see Webby waiting for him behind the group.

"I found another warning," she offered, pointing at a lower part of the wall.

It was better not to ask.

He read it aloud, frowning. True, it was fairly normal to find warnings and threats on adventures; some were genuine, others meant to mislead or scare off treasure hunters, but these seemed odd. The last one in particular sounded like a warning, but about what?

"Webby, in the legends you found, did they mention exactly how people got their answers?" Donald asked, tapping his fingers on the stone. Webby shook her head, brows drawn.

"I don't think so. It's usually just 'I read of my own death' or 'everything was as it said,' stuff like that. What are you thinking?" She asked, as he started walking towards the group again.

"Just trying to figure out what they mean by asking," he replied absently, but didn't have time to go into more detail before there was a shout of triumph from ahead. Webby took off running, while Donald kept up from behind her.

The end of the corridor took a sharp left turn and led to a final chamber (ugh, Donald thought, they would have to walk back along the corridor to get out), which held a pedestal in the center. On the pedestal was the scroll, long and looking surprisingly well maintained.

On the walls were more warnings about not asking things you didn't want answers to, the truth being cursed, your fate being sealed once the scroll answered. Scrooge wasn't looking at any of that, though, focused on the scroll itself while all the others clustered around him.

"Ask your question and the scroll will answer," Scrooge read from the top, then frowned.

"Wait, how do you ask a scroll a question?" Huey asked, baffled. Donald reached them in time to see the scroll glow slightly, before ink spilled across it in latin. He leaned in.

"It says 'say your question out loud, and the scroll will write your answer'," Donald read. Dewey lit up, bouncing on his heels.

"Awesome! Scroll, how will-" Donald slapped his hand over his beak before he could finish.

"Do not ask how anyone will die, who you will marry, or how the world ends," he ordered in a grim tone, looking at each person seriously. Dewey's eyes went wide behind Donald's hand, and he nodded. Huey went pale and backed away a bit, while Louie leaned towards Donald. Webby blinked at him.

"But, wait, why-" Donald waved a hand to stop her, and thankfully she stopped her question.

"Any question said out loud will be answered, and based on the warnings, it's always correct. Trust me, nobody handles knowing when or how they die very well," he explained to her. She pressed her beak tightly together, looking iffy. He sighed, letting both hands fall to

his sides in thought.

“It’s stressful, knowing that you’ll for sure die in a plane crash, or in a hospital,” Donald elaborated, “You’ll always be thinking about it, every time you fly, or have to get a check-up. And that’s if the scroll gives clear answers; half the time, these things give vaguely phrased prophecies that aren’t helpful, just worrying. It’s better not to know.” Della scoffed.

“Aw, come on Don! Don’t tell me you’re not a little bit curious!” She teased, but Donald was deadly serious and just scowled at her.

“No, I’m not,” he said simply, because he didn’t want to explain further. She pouted at him, and he tensed, watching her, watching Scrooge, waiting for them to ignore him anyway, to ask something that they would have to live with.

“Bah! No need to do things like that!” Scrooge waved him off, rolling up the scroll and stowing it in a special container in his pack. “I’m planning on using it for useful questions, not to give myself an existential crisis!” At that, all four kids perked back up.

“LIke what? Finding more cool treasures to find?” Louie asked eagerly.

“Or unexplored places? Lost historical sites?” Huey and Webby asked over each other, until they couldn’t be told apart. Scrooge laughed.

“Aye, yes all of those things,” he assured them, settling his bag on his shoulders and moving back towards the exit. Donald moved out of his way with a wary glance.

“You’re planning to use it for business deals,” he said flatly, and watched the back of Scrooge’s neck go slightly red under the feathers.

“Ah, well- it might have crossed my mind,” he admitted. Donald scoffed, but thankfully Huey jumped in so he didn’t have to.

“But that’s using magic to *cheat!”* He insisted, and even Launchpad seemed a bit skeptical of the idea.

“You’re always saying using magic instead of hard work is the lazy way of doing things,” Louie pointed out, looking irritated and a bit disappointed at the idea. Scrooge glanced back at them, awkward and blustering.

“Well, I- only in an emergency situation, you understand-” But he stuttered to a stop at seven unimpressed looks directed back at him.

“Ach, fine, I’ll put it away and won’t be using it for any business advantages,” Scrooge finally spat out, though Donald had a feeling that he would be walking back that statement later, when it was more immediately useful for him. After all, most of their artifacts disappeared into storage somewhere instead of ever being seen, so who would know if it had been used?

(Granted, Scrooge having more treasure than he would ever use had served Donald in the past; there were several artifacts in the Other Bin he had borrowed a few times before.)

With nothing else interesting in the temple, they walked back to the plane. The kids rushed back to the plane, disappointed and eager to be

done; the whole trip had largely been boring, and now they had a long flight back. Donald lingered back as the others started the trek down the hill, climbing the cliff the temple face was carved into, peering at the simple carvings.

On closer examination it seemed that the carvings had been more elaborate, but because of their exposure to the elements, had faded. Some still had faces of rage and despair, which spoke a lot to how the builders had felt about the scroll. Donald guessed it had given people too much bad or unpleasant news, and been locked away to avoid the temptation. The temple features may have been more of a warning than anything.

Still, he snapped pictures with interest, hoping that he could get more detail later and get a better idea. Huey and Webby might find the analysis interesting, at least; Violet didn't seem to be as interested in non-magical history, but maybe this could crossover enough to be worth hearing?

Donald shook his head, reminding himself that the kids' potential interest didn't have to be the reason he did things.

Still, he would try to mention it, when he had a chance. No doubt they were all coming up with ideas of what to ask the scroll on the way home before it got locked up.

He climbed further up the cliff face to look at another carving.

Below him, almost silently, a group of people entered the clearing around the entrance. Donald glanced down, at first wondering if Scrooge or one of the kids had come back, but instead found himself staring at the shiny helmets of several Eggheads, and the tall form of Steelbeak directing them towards the temple entrance.

He froze. All they had to do was look up, and they would see him; it was a miracle they hadn't already. Or the fact that the egg helmets didn't seem to provide much peripheral vision.

He glanced down the hill, but he couldn't see the plane from here, and hadn't seen exactly what direction the FOWL agents had come from; had they passed the kids already? Was the plane even able to fly, or had they sabotaged it on the way up?

He pressed himself back against the cliff, hoping the shadows on the face were enough to cover him.

"Alright, Eggheads, listen up! Boss wants us to get that scroll from McDuck at all costs, so we ambush them here and take it, nice and easy. Any questions?" Steelbeak barked, clearly not interested in any actual questions as he immediately turned to look at the entrance with minimal interest. Donald held still, barely breathing.

"Sir? What if there are multiple entrances? Shouldn't we scout around to be sure?" One Egghead asked hesitantly. Steelbeak waved her off.

"This is the entrance closest to the plane, they'll obviously come this way," he said dismissively. Clearly he didn't know how often adventures into abandoned temples ended in them digging themselves out of collapsed tunnels and walking halfway around a mountain. Still, the Egghead nodded, and the group spread out around the temple entrance.

Pinned down and only one upwards glance from being caught, Donald focused on not moving, trying desperately to think of a solution. He only had a small window of time before someone came back to get him, or someone looked up, and they would be caught. He might,

might , be able to get through the crowd of Eggheads towards the plane, but he wasn't sure he could also take down Steelbeak, and that would just be leading them to the kids. If the plane was already running, they could maybe do it, but as it was, he couldn't risk it.

But if Steelbeak saw him up here, he would no doubt realize Scrooge was already gone, and leg it for the plane anyway. Or an Egghead would point it out, but either way, they would be heading down the hill soon if he didn't come up with something.

What was FOWL even doing here? Them wanting the scroll made sense, certainly, but they hadn't been openly active in years, and this wasn't a subtle attack. Clearly, whatever they wanted the scroll for, it was significant enough to risk exposing their movements *and* tangling with Scrooge.

The FOWL agents had settled in their positions, and Steelbeak was himself posed at the entrance, clearly intending for a dramatic entrance, and thankfully facing away from Donald. He also seemed bored, and if Donald had more time, he would wait for him to inevitably go into the temple to speed up the confrontation.

But as he didn't, Donald opted to tip the scales just a bit; it was a long shot, but he really didn't relish getting shot at today.

If someone asked him how magic worked, he would explain that no two magics are the same. The shadow magic that Magica deSpell used wasn't the same as José's, or even Lena's when she used the amulet. Magic was just energy, and it took the right mindset to use it. How each person approached it was unique, and no two magical sources could be used in quite the same way.

Donald, when he had started to learn magic and how to access it, never took. He used magic as the sailor uses the wind and sea; the

power moved and he angled his reach to follow. He didn't so much lose power, he lost control, and hoped the power left him when he did.

But in the here and now, he reached into the cave through the stone, following crevices and cracks in the stone worn by centuries of rain and wind breaking apart stone, until he found what he wanted; the crates against the chamber walls.

With a thought, and a breath, they dashed themselves against the walls with an echoing crash and clatter, and Steelbeak perked up, spinning towards the entrance.

"Finally!" He declared, and lunged towards the entrance. A few of the Eggheads let out brief sounds of protest, before dashing after him, clearly deciding that following their commanding officer was better than waiting for orders, or sticking to the original plan. Donald took a breath, waited until they had all entered the first doorway, then burst into movement, falling more than climbing down and moving into the woods. He could already hear irritated yelling from Steelbeak inside, and he would likely be out again in a moment.

Better hidden now, Donald hesitated to run towards the plane. Nobody had mentioned if they had disabled the plane, or the rest of the group at all. Clearly they hadn't seen Scrooge below or they would have confronted him on the hill instead of walking the rest of the way to the temple.

Had Scrooge seen FOWL and managed to hide everyone in time? Or was it blind luck they hadn't been seen?

He needed to get to them to see, to make sure everyone was okay, but Steelbeak or one of the Eggheads might realize they had already left if he didn't do something to stall them.

Well, there were plenty of trees around…

Donald would like it known that if a tree falls in the woods, it's essentially impossible for nobody to be around to hear it; the sound was deafening, and echoed for miles.

The plane was, in fact, running when he got to their landing site, and nobody was in sight. Donald hopped through the doors cautiously, waiting to be ambushed, but everyone was milling around in the belly of the ship, chatting about the scroll and apparently unconcerned. Scrooge glanced up when he walked on, then called to the cockpit:

"Let's get a move on Launchpad, Donald's back with us!" The plane began to move, Donald throwing a hand out to catch himself as the doors shut. He gave Scrooge an irritated look, before he sobered up.

"Uncle Scrooge, did you see anything on your way down?" He asked, as quietly as he could over the engine. Scrooge gave him a baffled glance, already walking away.

"Not unless you mean a lack of my nephew, no," he said, dismissively, but then hesitated; Donald wondered what his face looked like, to get that reaction.

"Er, should I have?" He asked, stepping closer. Donald considered *not* telling him, for a wild moment; just dealing with the issue himself, later, or letting SHUSH know about it. But that was ridiculous.

"I saw Steelbeak and a pile of Eggheads go up to the temple; from what I overheard, FOWL wanted that scroll." Scrooge stared at him.

“I- are you sure, lad?” He asked, sounding so lost that Donald felt a bit bad; he never seemed to be able to give good news to people. Bad luck Donald. But he pressed on and nodded.

“Sure of it, stupid helmets and everything. Sounds like they’re making a comeback,” he said, already drafting a report for SHUSH. Scrooge was still staring at him.

“How did you get away?!” He demanded, just a bit too loud, and some of the kids looked up. Donald shushed him with a slight snarl, turned so that the kids couldn’t see his face.

“They never saw me,” he hissed, “obviously, or I would have said something faster. Or, you know, I would have been chased to the plane.” Or shot at, Donald thought, but there was no reason to say that. Scrooge went pale anyway, looking him over quickly with wide eyes.

“They can never get that scroll,” Donald continued, when Scrooge continued to stare, “I don’t know what they planned to do with it, but the last thing they need is the ability to confirm the truth of any question they want.”

SHUSH member identities, locations, bank passwords, the list went on. Just because the majority of people seeking out the scroll had clearly wanted only personal information, didn’t mean it couldn’t be used for larger truths.

This has Scrooge coming back to himself and shaking his head.

“Well, wouldn’t have done too much harm, I think. We managed to

test the scroll a bit while we waited for you to get back; it can only answer questions about itself or the person asking. Seems besides asking when you'll die or who you'll marry, it isn't all that useful." He sounded disappointed; Donald took a breath of relief. Less useful, sure, but he'd take that over more dangerous any day of the week.

Gone Viral

Donald was the last person off the plane, gathering up his unneeded medical supplies and debating telling Bentina about the FOWL agents. Scrooge would surely mention it, and she would probably pass it along to SHUSH.

On the other hand, he should probably give the report himself to make sure they got all the information, since Scrooge hadn't asked any questions besides asking how Donald had gotten away from the Eggheads.

"Unca Donald! Unca Donald! Have you seen this?!" Donald heard as a small green cannonball hit his chest. He caught himself and Louie, but only just, and had to wait a moment to catch his breath.

"Have I seen *what* ?" He squawked, pulling himself back to his feet and setting Louie back down. Louie waved his phone in Donald's face, bouncing on his toes to get closer. Donald went cross-eyed to try to see, and Louie slowed his frantic movements enough for Donald to catch a glimpse of the screen.

"Uh… something on Tweeter?" He guessed, since he could see the blue background. Louie sighed, and stopped waving entirely to hand the phone over. He was still bouncing, and couldn't contain his manic grin.

"You went *viral!"* Louie shrieked, while Donald peered at the screen, baffled. He could see his own account, and a post at the top that, after a moment, he realized was a recording of their impromptu dance party from the other day.

He hadn't realized Louie had posted that to his account. The caption

was ‘spending time with the kids!’ so he hadn’t done it to embarrass him… maybe he hadn’t wanted to seem too fond of his family, he was almost a teenager after all.

“Huh, Mick did mention seeing that video,” he said to himself, before noticing the number of hits the post had.

“I haven’t had time to go through the notes, but this is. So. *Cool!”* Louie yelled, and ran back inside yelling for his brothers. Donald watched him go, and wondered how long before Dewey got involved in the yelling.

A shattering sound came from inside the Manor as Donald reached the houseboat, so that answered that.

When he got inside, he sent an email to SHUSH advising he was back in the States and had some information to provide (he would let Bentina report in first to keep his cover), then glanced at the Tweeter app on his phone.

Curious now, he opened it up and went to the notifications tab, which was filled with new followers, comments, and messages. He stared at it for a long moment, waiting for the content to change. When nothing did, and his screen went dark, he let out a long breath and scrolled to the start.

He found the first comment, from Louie: *Uncle Donald: cool musician or dorky dancer?* He rolled his eyes with a fond smile and moved on.

Comments from the kids and friends, Violet commenting on the dance styles, Lena asking what band they were playing. One comment from José, a pile from Panchito.

José: nice to hear our old music again! we'll have to give them a concert when we're all together again!

Panchito: OMG

Panchito: DON

Panchito: you're all so cute!

Panchito: they have great taste!

Panchito: let them all know they are very talented!

Laughing now, Donald scrolled on. Max Goof had sent a bunch of emojis, which Donald couldn't fully follow, but they included music notes and smiley faces, so presumably it was good. Daisy saying she couldn't believe he still had those records.

And there was Mickey, saying how nice it was to see them all having fun. From his personal account. The one with millions of followers.

The explosion of activity was right after that, unsurprisingly. Donald groaned, flopping backwards onto his couch. Yeah, that would do it.

He let himself have a few minutes to grumble under his breath, resisting the urge to break something only because Mickey had probably *not* meant to inflict internet fame on Donald. Probably.

Could have been playing a long con to get revenge for something or other. Had Donald ever apologized for accidentally breaking his nose?

When he could keep himself from breaking his screen, he turned the phone back on, sorting through the mess of other messages. Some were strangers asking who he was, how did Mickey Mouse of all people know him, what band was playing. He answered the last set of questions only, sending a quick message to Panchito and José warning them if they hadn't seen this mess yet.

He got one reply immediately.

José : *well it's about time we get some appreciation!*

While Donald debated how to reply to *that,* he continued on. There were other comments on the video itself that, thankfully, were positive and generally variations of 'heartwarming' and 'cute.' He viciously blocked anyone that wasn't in that category.

Buried in the remaining followers (he assumed he would lose those when he turned out to be boring), and other requests for interviews (ignored), he found a few comments from other friends.

Bugs: still got the moves there, Don. we should get all the kids together sometime, bet my kids can beat yours in a dance off.

Donald: i'll take that bet, anytime

He sent the message without thought, forgetting until he hit send that the message was public. That would probably be another kettle of fish.

Problems for later.

Daffy: pfft, you couldn't even play our old piano routine?

Donald stared at that message, which had a link to some video. It was almost guaranteed to either be some recording of their dueling piano show, or some prank video. He refused to give Daffy the satisfaction of getting one over on him, even if nobody would ever know if he clicked the link or not, so he ignored it.

Finally, he sent a new text to José of a few laughing emojis instead of coming up with a real response, then tossed his phone away to take a nap.

He had no idea how long he was able to sleep for, but it felt like maybe five minutes before the door burst open with a " *You know Mickey Mouse?!"* and an echoing slam of the door crashing into the wall. He would normally have shot several feet in the air, but since he was lying on his stomach, he ended up flailing and falling to the floor with a strangled shout.

All four kids leapt at him, Dewey clinging to his shoulders from behind to yell directly in his ear, Huey and Louie grabbing each arm and tugging. Webby he couldn't see or hear, but was sure she was present somewhere in the tangle.

"What about Mick?" He grumbled, trying to get back up while balancing the kids clinging to him, and with no hands. Louie scoffed, yanking harder and nearly toppling the whole operation again.

“You know *Mickey Mouse* and you didn’t tell us? Why have we never met him? How did *you* meet him?” Donald opened his mouth, but was interrupted by Dewey’s shouting on his shoulder.

“Can we go meet him now, can he teach me acting tricks, he’s one of my favorite actors EVER and you *know him-”* he yelled; Donald nearly launched him in the air at the noise, stumbling.

“Do you think he knows where Walt Disney’s frozen head is? I always thought DisneyLand but maybe he would know for sure, I would love to see it, it would be so cool Unca Donald-” Webby was gushing, and yeah, she was somewhere on his back with Dewey, while Huey gave him an intrigued look.

“Wait, is that who we were going to visit in L.A.?” he asked, and the endless questions stopped for a moment; Donald nodded, flopping back onto the couch. Webby giggled as he half crushed them against the cushions, squirming to perch on the back while Dewey moved to clinging to Donald’s back like a koala, resting his beak on Donald’s shoulder. Donald couldn’t help brushing his face, just slightly, against his cheek with a fond smile.

“Yes,” he continued, since they had calmed down a hair, “we’re going to visit Mickey when we go to L.A. I have mentioned him before, just not with his full name.” He tried to remember what other questions had been asked.

“I’m sure he would be delighted to teach you some tricks Dewey, and I have no idea if he knows anything about Walt Disney’s head Webby,” he said, because Mickey would love to tell that story and Donald wasn’t going to ruin his fun.

“Why didn’t you tell us you knew Mickey Mouse? Who else do you know??” Louie demanded, dragging Donald’s attention back to him. His eyes shone with excitement and a bit of disappointment as well. Donald winced awkwardly.

“I mean, I did mention him sometimes, just not by full name,” he repeated, but he could tell that that explanation wasn’t going to fly.

“We haven’t seen each other in a long time, and he’s busy a lot, so we couldn’t just visit,” Donald continued, sighing, “And it seemed silly to tell you three I knew a movie star when you couldn’t actually meet him.” Granted, he probably could have set something up, but he wanted the kids out of the spotlight, and meeting Mickey risked them being spotted and identified.

“I mean, we probably wouldn’t have believed you,” Dewey noted from his shoulder; Louie and Huey nodded. Donald huffed a laugh.

“Thanks boys. And I know a lot of people, you’re going to have to be more specific, Louie,” he added. Louie glared at him.

“How about any other famous people that your darling, beloved nephews would love to meet,” Louie suggested. Donald snorted, using the grip Huey and Louie still had on his hands to drag them into his lap in a tangled hug.

“Well, you boys are older, now, so I could-” he started, before Dewey burst in.

“No! We can figure it out!” he insisted, wiggling down to fall onto his brothers; Huey shouted in surprise, Louie in anger, and Donald leaned back before an elbow slammed into his shoulder. He and Webby shared a look, before she burst into giggles again.

“It could be fun! A mystery that isn’t secretly emotionally devastating!” She pointed out eagerly. Louie glanced at her, from where he had managed to peek his head out of the pile.

“Probably not as dangerous either,” he said; Webby pouted, but Huey looked interested now.

Donald… probably shouldn’t agree to this. Should just give a list of old friends and call it a day. But on the other hand, the kids did love a mystery, and it was relatively harmless. Besides, if he pushed back, the kids would be all the more determined. And would probably conclude he was trying to hide something.

“Alright, rules: we can ask Unca Donald to confirm an answer but we can’t ask for hints,” Huey declared, jotting down notes. Dewey shook his head.

“No way, hints are part of the fun!” He insisted; Webby nodded, Louie shrugged.

“I vote hints; we don’t even know where to start,” he pointed out. Dewey gestured at Donald wildly; Donald did get smacked that time.

“Oops, sorry Unca Donald. Come on Huey! We *grew up* with Unca Donald and didn’t know any of this stuff, we’re gonna need some hints to start with!” he insisted. Huey and Louie looked at each other, considering, while Donald winced at the reminder. He wasn’t proud of how many people he had lost contact with when the boys had hatched.

“Fine, some hints. But only when all four of us are together! And Unca

Donald!” Huey stated, pointing at Donald; he raised a brow. “Don’t spoil it all! Just some hints on where to start, and only when we ask!” Donald nodded seriously, fighting a grin.

“Should I tell you if you’ve gotten everyone?” He asked; a fierce exchange of glares, glances and pointed coughs ensued, before he was given a decisive nod from all four kids.

“How do we feel about bringing in others? Violet, Lena?” Webby asked, leaning forward enough that Donald was worried about her balance. If his arms weren't still trapped, he would catch her.

“Or Boyd?” Huey added, tapping a pen against his notebook. Louie shrugged.

“It’s not a competition, why not?” A pause. Donald felt an immediate change in the atmosphere in the room, and let his head fall back to the cushions with a groan.

“Dibs on Webby!” Dewey yelled, and Louie grabbed Huey tightly enough that Huey yelped.

“But wait, what about Boyd, Violet and Lena? We can’t leave them out,” Webby pointed out, looking incredibly distressed at the idea. Dewey shrugged.

“They can be a third team!” But Louie was shaking his head.

“Oh no, Boyd and Violet have an advantage already, they can’t be together!”

“Besides, Boyd doesn’t know either of them very well,” Huey pointed out.

“Boys versus girls?” Webby offered; Dewey pouted.

“Then we have the advantage, I think, since we all know Unca Donald better,” Huey said with a frown, tapping his pen again. The kids squabbled about varying combinations, but none of them agreed; Donald tried to shift, but all four of them were sitting on him and clearly had no intention of moving.

“Maybe we don’t compete? We don’t even have rules,” Huey fretted, ripping another page out of his notebook. Louie scoffed.

“Sure we do. Each new name is one point. Maybe we just work alone,” he proposed, but nobody liked that idea.

“What about bonus points for really obscure ones?” Webby said, and while Huey was writing turned to glare at Louie. “And this is a group effort, Louie!”

“I don’t know if any of my friends are *that* obscure,” Donald protested, but all four kids gave him disbelieving looks.

“You’re friends with the actual god Storkules, Unca Donald,” Louie pointed out, which, fair. Donald mentally made a note to come up with reasonable stories for his more unusual friendships. Preferably ones that didn’t include his being a superhero, sorcerer, time traveler, spy…

His life was strange.

While the kids continued to argue, he reached for his phone. There were… a lot of notifications again. Was this going to be a constant issue, really? Donald supposed that he could ignore the notes themselves, but the situation was going to bug him. Especially if anyone in Duckburg had seen it.

When he had first moved in with Scrooge as a child, he and Della had been on the lookout constantly for kidnapping attempts and attacks. Things had died down after a few months, but they had never exactly stopped, everyone always thinking that Scrooge would pay for getting them back. Ma Beagle was the only one that realized he wouldn't; the risk of repeat offenders was too high.

Or, well, because it would cost money to do so. Donald had never wanted to ask.

There was no chance he could be seen in public until this had died down, unless he wanted to be mobbed. Or kidnapped by the Beagle Boys. It shouldn't take too long before someone else was more interesting than him, realistically; the Internet moved faster than the rumor mill. Still, he wanted to avoid going out for at least a few days, when he wasn't the most interesting duck of the day.

He also had a text from Launchpad, which was a much easier thing to deal with.

LP: what does viral mean? Gos is saying you went there???

DD: it means a lot of people are watching that dance video Louie posted, basically

Donald then blinked at his phone, a thought crossing his mind.

DD: did Drake still want to introduce himself and Gosalyn? I don't think i can go outside for a while, and I would still love to meet him

The kids were beyond excited to have Gosalyn and Drake over (mostly Gosalyn, who Dewey had started gushing about). At first Donald had suggested some kind of picnic in the yard, but his frankly horrid luck kicked in, and dark clouds rolled across the sky threatening rain at every moment. So it became making a frankly absurd volume of sandwiches and preparing to show the Mallards around the Manor. It should at least be an interesting afternoon that way.

The rumble of distant thunder kept Donald company while he worked in the kitchen. He had left his phone elsewhere, not wanting to deal with the increasing notifications; he upped his timeline for being forgotten to a week.

Huey poked his beak through the doorway, looking around warily; it was always a gamble when Donald was cooking if the kitchen was safe to enter. Seeing no flying condiments, he walked in, holding his cell phone out like an offering.

“Hey, can Boyd come over? We’re both working on a Bird Identification badge,” he asked casually. Donald eyed the phone suspiciously, but couldn’t see a reason to say no.

“Sure, just make sure he cleared it with Gyro,” he finally answered. Huey grinned and held the phone higher.

“He’s on the line! He said he needed to talk to you, and you aren’t answering your phone,” Huey explained, and Donald made a face as he took the phone. Some part of him missed the days of no cell phones, when he could just disappear and nobody expected him to answer a call.

But he couldn’t do that anyway, too many people he couldn’t afford to miss a call from.

“Hello?” From the other line, there were sounds of machines misfiring and yelling. A frazzled voice answered after a second.

“Yes! Donald, can Boyd join you at the McDuck’s place? We’re having… some small issues at the lab today, and I would appreciate it if he could be away for a bit,” Gyro spat out. Donald blinked, concerned.

“He’s always welcome,” he said, because he was an adult and was allowed to do that now (and Bentina would probably back him up), “Are you okay over there?”

“What? Yes, yes, everything is fine. We just need to… air out the lab for a bit, that’s all. We’ll be there soon.” And saying so, Gyro hung up. Donald peered at the phone screen for a moment, before confirming that yes, Gyro had ended the call, then handed the phone to Huey.

“Help me make him something to eat? I don’t know what Boyd likes,” Donald asked; Huey was usually his partner in the kitchen out of the boys. He was rewarded by Huey’s face lighting up, before an odd expression crossed his face.

“Er… you know he’s an android, right, Unca Donald?” Donald shrugged, turning back to the sandwiches.

“Yeah, but he can still eat, from what I’ve seen, so. What does he like?”

That seemed to be the correct thing to say, because Huey’s answering smile was as bright as the sun.

Donald considered him as they made very precise PB&Js, carefully cut diagonally but with crusts on. Huey stood on a chair to fully reach the countertop.

“So, gonna pull an Uncle moment here,” Donald finally said, wincing internally when Huey’s shoulders shot up to his ears. “Are you doing alright? On the plane yesterday, you seemed worried, and I want to know if there’s anything I can do.” Huey’s shoulders stayed high, but they loosened slightly, as though he was trying to maintain the tension and couldn’t.

“Violet asked what your new job was, and when I realized we just didn’t know, I…” he trailed off, fingers tapping a rapid beat on the counter. Donald stepped forward to try to get a view of his face, but he kept his chin down.

“We don’t see you as much, since we moved in here, and I don’t like that we didn’t know. It’s- you’re important, Unca Donald, and I think we all kinda forgot, cause Unca Scrooge is new and exciting, and Mom! Mom is back, and that’s crazy!” And now he waved his arms frantically, wide sweeping gestures; Donald reached forward to take away the knife, and Huey swung to face him, face intent.

“You’re important, no matter how fun adventures are. I don’t want to forget that,” Huey finished, and Donald swept him into a tight hug, fighting back tears.

“You’re such a good kid,” he mumbled into Huey’s hat, “I am so lucky to have raised you. All three of you.”

Huey clutched at his shoulders.

“We’re lucky to have you too, Unca Donald,” he whispered. They stayed that way for a while.

Launchpad was a nervous wreck, trying to get drinks and snacks together with shaking hands, and checking his phone every few minutes. Donald sent the kids to tidy their rooms for guests, then turned to the much taller duck.

“It’s just lunch,” he said soothingly. True, they had been planning to do introductions in small doses, but besides the kids, it was just Donald anyway. Scrooge had gone back to the office, and Bentina, when Donald offered to supervise, had decided to take an afternoon out. What, exactly, she was doing with her off time she didn't say, and Donald didn’t ask. Della had briefly offered to stick around as an additional adult, but shortly afterwards decided to go see Penny and the other Moonlanders.

“Sounds like a dads and kids day,” was all she had said about it, and Donald had been unable to answer, overcome with some emotion he couldn’t quite describe.

“Yeah, yeah! Just lunch! And Dewey’s already met him, so that’s good! Just us, we’re gonna have lunch, and chat, and it’ll be great!” Launchpad said, too fast and still jittery. Donald patted him on the shoulder, made sure they had enough chips, and hoped that Launchpad would be calmer when Drake arrived.

Webby approached him once Bentina had left for her me-time, holding her phone out with a sheepish grin; Donald smelled a conspiracy.

"Um… is it okay if Lena and Violet come over? Huey mentioned they were working on a birdwatching badge, and Violet wants to compare notes, and well, Lena is our friend too-" and it was at this point that Donald wondered how they could possibly work on bird watching when it was raining. He sighed, and held out his hand for the phone, hiding a fond smile when Webby's face lit up.

Ty dropped Violet and Lena off a few minutes later, on his way to Duckburg University, and the girls were quickly swept up with the other kids, secretive whispers and glances ringing alarm bells, but since he had no proof of any scheming yet, he ignored it. It was just as likely they were planning some dangerous adventures as it was just kids being kids anyway.

Donald got himself and Launchpad some water, dragging the much taller duck to sit down at the kitchen table. He clutched his glass like a lifeline but didn't drink.

"Are you sure you're okay? We don't have to meet up today," Donald offered, but Launchpad shook his head, almost frantically.

"No, I definitely want you all to meet. Just- you know when you're taking off in a plane, and all that pressure on you as you go faster and faster, and you're shooting up in the air, but you haven't leveled out yet?" Launchpad asked quickly, one hand moving in a sharp incline into the air. Donald nodded, hesitantly.

"It's like that. I'm excited, and nervous, and my stomach is swooping, but I know in a few minutes it'll all be great, because he'll be here,

you know? Right now we're still heading towards cruising altitude," Launchpad explained, and having said that, he took a long gulp of water and breathed deeply through his nose.

The doorbell rang. Launchpad let out a strangled whimper, a thunder of footsteps echoed from upstairs, and Donald breathed out, slowly, feeling somewhat nervous himself now. Time to go.

Single Dads Club

Drake and Gyro had arrived at the same time, and were avoiding looking at each other while Gosalyn and Boyd were chatting about Gizmoduck and Darkwing Duck. The rain had temporarily stopped, but it was threatening to restart any moment. Donald stifled a laugh, then moved to the side to let the pack of children by to launch themselves at the new arrivals.

"Donald," Gyro said stiffly, giving a brief nod before sliding through the doorway inside. He didn't actually go far, just into the entryway, where he peered anxiously at the children wrestling in the doorway. Donald squinted at him in slight confusion (he couldn't remember if Gyro had said he would be staying), then turned back to Drake, who was giving Launchpad a tight hug and looked like he was about to vibrate right out of his feathers.

"Hi, I'm Donald," Donald said, bracing himself for the inevitable baffled look at his voice. Drake was more subtle than most, but he still blinked and paused a moment before holding out a hand.

"Hi! Nice to meet you, Drake Mallard. Launchpad has talked about you a lot!" Donald took his hand; the man frowned slightly, and stared at him like something was confusing. As Donald took a step back, the shadows of the doorway fell over Drake's eyes, briefly, and Donald took one short breath.

"All good things, of course!" Drake continued, wringing his hands, while Launchpad gave a short laugh. He looked calmer with Drake there.

"Unca Donald! Unca Donald! Can we show Gos around the Manor? She's never been here before!" Dewey shouted, coming back to the door, dragging the red headed gosling behind him. The other kids

trailed behind, with Lena looking torn between aloof and genuine excitement. The others looked less conflicted about it.

"Go ahead. But!" He added, when they all tried to bolt past. "No leaving the Manor without permission! That includes time portals, alternate dimensions, or using any magical or scientific artifacts around the Manor, understood?"

"Yes Unca Donald/Mr. Duck," seven voices chorused at him, and off they went into the house, arguing loudly about where to go first. Donald turned to lead the way to the living room, but found that both Drake and Gyro were watching him closely.

"Uh…?" He lost his train of thought entirely, staring back.

"They just… listen to you?" Drake asked, staring at him. "Just like that?" Donald made an 'eh' motion with his hand.

"Not all the time, really," Donald answered, because really, his boys were chaotic when they were bored. Webby was too polite to really disobey most of the time; she just avoided asking for permission when she didn't want to be told no.

But Gyro was also watching him closely, like an experiment that was giving incredible results.

"They listen to you more than anyone else," he argued, "even the ones that aren't actually your kids. And all the McDuck kids default to asking you for advice, usually." Donald disagreed that Webby asked him first, personally, but the boys were used to asking him for things. Besides, Della was still getting used to being back on Earth, Bentina came across as unapproachable to the boys, and Scrooge was tricky to ask anything. You never knew if you would get genuine advice or

some thinly veiled insult and be told that you were smart enough to figure it out yourself.

Still, he shrugged.

“They’re all good kids, and I am technically in charge today,” he pointed out; none of the other men looked convinced, but the topic dropped as he led the way to the living room.

“Gyro, Drake, have you two met?” Donald asked absently, passing out drinks like a good host. Both men glanced at each other, then shook their heads.

“Gyro is Scrooge’s Head of R&D, and Boyd’s dad. Drake is Gosalyn’s dad, and Launchpad's partner,” Donald explained briefly. Gyro’s eyes widened slightly, glancing between Launchpad and Drake with a bit more interest.

“Congratulations,” he offered after a moment, in a stilted tone; he sounded like he had been coached, but he seemed genuine enough. Launchpad grinned widely, pulling Drake into his side on the couch; Drake was bright red, but had a helplessly pleased look on his face.

“Thanks! You know, it’s nice to just hang out,” Launchpad said cheerfully, gesturing with his free arm in a vague pattern. “Usually I’m running all over the place for work.” Drake snorted, relaxing into Launchpad’s arm a bit.

“I’ll say! McDuck certainly keeps you busy!” He blinked and darted a nervous glance in Donald’s direction.

“Er, I mean- that is, I didn’t-” Donald waved off his stuttering with a laugh.

“You’re right, for sure! I’ve worked for him a few times, and he’s a hell of a taskmaster!” Donald said with a laugh, slightly bitter.

“Tell me about it, I think I work 18 hour days most of the week,” Gyro grumbled into his glass. Donald winced.

“I’d ask if he’s paying you overtime, but…” he trailed off, and Gyro scoffed humorlessly.

“I am technically salaried, so it doesn’t matter how late I stay,” he explained in a slightly snooty tone, but the bags under his eyes undersold it. Drake made a face.

“He was similar on the movie set, but that’s pretty normal for filming, so it didn’t stand out. Does he really do that to all his employees?” Donald shrugged, taking a sip of his drink.

“Eh, yes and no. Definitely the ones that work closely with him, I assume his normal office workers get regular hours. But Gyro and Launchpad work for him directly, and I’m, well, his nephew, so,” he replied, and wondered if it was out of order to suggest they never work for his uncle at all.

Most of his employees got paid well, and got decent benefits, but Scrooge worked everyone to the bone when he worked with them. He would say he worked as hard as he made his employees work, but in Donald’s experience he rarely did so. Maybe it was different if you weren’t family.

“Well, it’s nice that you at least get this time off…?” Drake offered nervously, but Gyro shook his head.

“Nah, visits to McDuck Manor are included as part of my work duties, per my contract,” Gyro explained, leaning back and looking incredibly smug about it. Donald choked on a laugh, snorting on his drink.

“Way to get over the miser, Gyro,” he chuckled when he got his throat cleared, raising his glass in a mock toast. Gyro nodded back, hiding an actual smile behind his drink.

“So, you’re an actor? Working on anything interesting right now?” Donald asked Drake, whose eyes lit up. He shot forward, and Donald found himself copying his enthusiasm.

“Oh, I’m working with a small film group on a movie about space exploration; we don’t have a large budget, but it’s quite an exciting project!”

While he explained the parts of the script he was allowed to talk about (an interesting alien species that communicated through colors), Donald glanced between him and Launchpad with interest. Launchpad’s face was so unbearably fond as he watched Drake, while Drake leaned against him almost subconsciously, it was almost too much to handle. A quick peek at Gyro told him the chicken had either gotten less overly uncomfortable about others’ romances, or he was too invested in the movie concept to care. He was now offering to help with their special effects, which could be a disaster or brilliance.

A loud crash interrupted them, directly above their heads. Donald shot up, smacking his leg on the coffee table as he did. Before he could take more than a step, there was shouting from the top floor.

“Nothing broke!” He took a moment to identify the voice as Gosalyn.

“We’re fine!” That was Louie, and he relaxed slightly, but was still moving towards the doorway.

“Just Dewey and Webby sparring Unca Donald!” Huey called out, and Donald let out a breathy sigh and stopped entirely. He let himself slump back into his seat with a groan.

“Kids, gonna make me start molting again,” he grumbled, rubbing his shin. All the times he had hit it on things, it was a wonder he didn’t have a permanent dent in the bone.

When he looked back up, Drake was looking above them with slight concern.

“Should we stop them?” He asked, tapping his fingers on his knee. Donald shrugged slightly, recovering his (thankfully empty) glass from the floor where he had dropped it.

“We can if you’re concerned, but Webby and Dewey won’t hurt each other. And I trust Huey to yell if they’re getting too out of hand,” he explained. Gyro, from the corner of his eye, was tense, also staring upwards.

“Boyd isn’t as used to other children,” he said, sounding worried but clearly trying to hide it, “I should check on him and make sure he’s doing fine with this many other people.” And he stood and speed walked to the door.

“They’re in Webby’s room,” Donald called absently, sitting up straight

again and deciding to refill his glass while Gyro was gone. Drake trailed after him, clutching his own cup tightly.

“Do you ever worry? About them fighting?” Drake asked, quietly, staring at the opposite wall. Donald huffed a breath.

“I worry about everything,” he said easily, rubbing his face; for a moment, exhaustion weighed on him, every little thing that could ever go wrong running through his head. “Adventures, sparring, the Beagle Boys… I made them wear life jackets at all times when we lived in the harbor, in case the boat sank.” He sighed, turned to face Drake, who watched him like he held all the answers in the universe.

“You always will,” Donald told him, “Nobody warns you, but you’ll constantly worry that something will happen, from reasonable fears of them breaking their arm in some hair-brained scheme, to worrying that the ceiling is going to collapse when it’s windy. Well, that last might just be me,” he added sheepishly.

“The key is finding a balance between protective and stifling. It’s your job as a parent to keep them safe, but you also need to give them room to grow, or they’ll find it themselves,” he continued, and now he was staring out into the distance, through the window but not really seeing anything beyond it.

“Harder to do with this lifestyle though,” Donald murmured absently. Drake made a sound of agreement, then startled.

“Er, that does make sense! Adventures do seem… dangerous,” he said, and he looked upwards like he could see through the floors. Donald gave him a considering look.

“They can be. Scrooge is good at what he does, one of the best, but

things can happen. But adventuring is in their blood; they were getting up to mischief long before he started taking them along." He paused, weighing his next words carefully. "I'll always worry, but at the same time, they make me so proud I could burst. The last thing I ever want to do is clip their wings." Drake nodded, face utterly serious.

"Gos is amazing, brilliant, and so so brave," he gushed, looking near tears, "All I want to do is keep her safe, let her grow up to be… whatever she wants to be, cause she can do anything! But I- every time she gets a bruise I want to wrap her up in bubble wrap!" Donald gestured for him to go on.

"Any advice on *how* to handle it?" Donald laughed a bit, shaking his head.

"People to talk to helps a bit, but if you ever figure out something better, you let me know."

Drake added Donald's phone number to his phone as they left the kitchen; Donald hoped he would use it. Asking for help could be daunting, honestly.

Gyro was frowning at the doorway when they entered, arms crossed. Launchpad looked pleased, which all but confirmed to Donald that he had purposefully let them have a private conversation.

"Were you dispensing parenting advice in there, Donald? You're not chatty about much else, lately," Gyro sniped at them; Donald raised an eyebrow, confused.

"It came up," he said eventually, "Kids alright?" Gyro huffed at him.

“They’re destructive and loud little things, and they have some conspiracy board up that I am apparently not allowed to see. Even Boyd wouldn’t tell me anything; your pack has corrupted him,” he accused, pointing dramatically at Donald. Drake and Launchpad looked at them both in confusion.

“Don’t ask me, they always have something going on,” Donald told him tiredly, “I’ll let you know if I find out.” Gyro’s eyes narrowed.

“What, not even an idea?” he demanded, voice dropping threateningly. Donald was immune to it though, so he just flopped into his seat with a puff of air.

“Nope, not a clue. Probably nothing dangerous or Huey would have said something. And if Webby has a board up, it’s usually family research, so that’ll mean library visits and going to the archives,” Donald explained, holding up both hands in surrender at Gyro’s intense expression. Why was this family full of semi-deranged people?

Why no, he was not examining that statement, not at all. NO self-awareness today, thank you very much.

Gyro scowled, falling back into his chair.

“Why are you all insane,” he grumbled. Donald laughed.

“Pot, kettle,” he replied, gesturing between them, and earned himself a growl, which he ignored. Drake looked between them, brows drawn.

“So that wasn’t why we planned this visit?” He asked, glancing up at Launchpad briefly. “I was guessing that I would be hearing about some adventure when we came over today, if I’m being perfectly honest.” Donald shook his head, taking a sip of his water.

“Launchpad and I were already planning on setting this up,” he reminded both of them, “we just decided to host things here instead because I really don’t want to go out anytime soon, and it seemed like a good time.”

“Besides,” he added, “between Dewey talking about Gosalyn, and Launchpad gushing about you, it seemed more than time to actually let everyone meet.” Drake went slightly red, looking up at Launchpad with a grin.

“Gushing, really?” He teased, but Launchpad was completely immune to embarrassment, and nodded enthusiastically, tightening the arm around Drake with a wide smile.

“Of course I was! Who wouldn’t brag about their smart, brave, handsome, daring boyfriend!” He declared, before dropping a loud, dramatic kiss on Drake’s cheek. Gyro made a face into his cup.

“Ugh, gross,” he grumbled.

“There it is,” Donald chuckled. Gyro turned his scowl on him.

“What was that, Donald?” Donald gave him a sly grin.

“Just wondering when you would say something, was all. You’re usually pretty loud about being allergic to affection,” he pointed out,

and smiled wider at Gyro's affronted gasp.

"I am not *allergic to affection!* " He denied, face turning red. Donald nodded, sagely.

"No, you just disapprove of any positive emotional reactions that aren't being excited about the scientific process."

He wasn't shocked by the glass that was flung at his head. Despite how enraged he looked, there was a smile trying to make its way onto Gyro's face, under the bluster.

"Um, are they always like this?" Drake asked Launchpad from the couch.

"No," Gyro snapped.

"Yes," Donald replied. Launchpad shrugged.

"I don't think I've actually seen them in the same room for very long before," he said thoughtfully. Donald blinked, then glanced at Gyro, who shrugged.

"I've been busy. I saw you during the Shadow War?" He offered, getting up to fetch the thrown glass. Donald considered that, then bobbed his head in tentative agreement. Drake looked lost at that.

"We have known each other a long time," Donald offered.

“ *Too* long,” Gyro added, settling back in his seat. Donald waved a hand at him.

“Bah, I’m a delight, you should be happy to know me.” He said in a grand tone. Gyro rolled his eyes with a bored huff.

“Sure, the guy nobody can understand, who manages to get struck by lightning so much he’s a statistical anomaly,” he scoffed. Donald made a rude gesture.

“Admit it, you want to study that,” he laughed, and Gyro looked at him with an immediate, wild expression.

“The thought consumes me. Every waking moment the mystery taunts me,” Gyro said, in such an intense tone that Donald leaned back, just slightly.

Drake, if anything, looked even more confused, but Launchpad laughed.

“You guys sound like brothers,” he told them. Donald groaned and fell back into his chair.

“You had to say it,” he moaned, while Gyro turned on him like a viper, an unholy light entering his eyes.

“We are *not* siblings! I refuse to be any kind of part of this family, under any circumstances! It will not happen!” He yelled, gesturing around the house at large, as though to encompass the entirety of the

family, present and not.

“You’ve been on an adventure, that made you family,” Donald told him, while staring at the ceiling. Gyro let out a frustrated screech.

“This whole family is crazy,” Drake whispered to Launchpad, while Gyro went on a long (and rehearsed) rant about the danger of being a McDuck. Launchpad laughed.

“Isn’t it great?” Donald smiled to himself.

Yeah, it was pretty great.

Boyd: A Definitely Real Boy

Once Gyro had calmed down, he was persuaded to talk about some of the recent inventions he had created, including a fridge that could sense if anything inside was growing mold and an alarm that went off if someone hadn't washed their hands in the bathroom. The conversation wandered along, and abruptly it was time for Launchpad to get Scrooge from the Bin, and Drake winced at the time.

"We should do this again; it was great to meet you!" Drake enthused, pumping Donald's hand; he let it happen, glancing back at Gosalyn briefly. She had been invited to spend the night, but both she and her dad had declined; Drake had seemed nervous about the idea of his daughter being out of his sight for so long, and while she grumbled about it, it seemed clear that Gosalyn didn't actually want to be away from him too long either.

"Text me whenever, I'm usually awake," he told him, holding his hand a moment longer to emphasize the statement. Drake nodded, gave his other goodbyes, and took off.

"Next time, sleepover!" Webby declared, fist in the air dramatically. Behind Webby, Lena snorted, with a grin.

"You sure about that Pink? We don't have a great track record with those," she pointed out, but she was smiling. She usually was, when she was looking at Webby.

"Of course I am! Most of them have gone fine in the end anyway; we got to defeat your nightmares, and got you out of the shadow realm!" Webby threw her hands on her hips as she spoke, giving Lena a fierce smile.

“Webby has a point,” Violet added, “overall I believe that our sleepovers have had a net positive effect, despite some more extreme events that may be coloring our perception of events.” Lena held her hands up.

“Alright super nerds, let’s just calm down before we start pulling out the charts,” she said, but if Donald was reading Violet’s expression correctly, the charts would be happening regardless. The kids all retreated back into the house, still arguing about the sleepover topic, while Gyro cleared his throat.

“Donald, I have something I needed to ask you, if you have a second,” he said, politer than was usual for Gyro. Must be serious, Donald thought as they stepped to the side of the porch.

Gyro looked out at the yard for a long moment, while Donald absently tapped his foot. He didn’t want to rush him, but every moment they stood talking about obviously adult issues, the more likely someone would start eavesdropping.

“Donald. If- if anything happens to me,” Gyro began, and Donald felt himself go cold.

He had been on the receiving end of these conversations more than he cared to remember. Had given more, each time convinced it would be the last time he would give it. There was no preparing for the moment, and they never got easier. He took a long breath and held it until it ached, then breathed out.

Relax.

Nothing will happen.

Breathe.

Gyro had paused, clearly sorting over his words.

“Crackshell-Cabrera knows Boyd pretty well,” he continued after a moment, beak twisted, “but I don’t know if he could handle a child. And his- I mean, our job- if I was incapacitated, he likely would be too, given where we both work and all. So, it would be better if…” he didn’t seem to know how to continue.

Donald patted him on the shoulder, just once.

“I will take Boyd, if you are ever unable. Temporarily or otherwise,” he said seriously, and Gyro nodded.

“Good. Out of the people I know, you were the best option,” he said pompously, and Donald couldn’t help but smile.

“Thank you. But let’s make sure this stays hypothetical, alright?” And Gyro laughed; the tension was out of his shoulders, but it remained around his eyes.

“Yes, this is purely a hypothetical,” he agreed, but his voice was too low to sound convincing. Donald recognized the tone, the expression. He had seen it in the mirror every day after Della disappeared, until the boys tried to steal his boat and they fell back in with family like they had never left.

It had been a struggle, trusting Scrooge with the boys for any length of

time. He still didn't think his uncle could handle them full time, if anything happened to him. But having someone in their corner had taken some weight off his shoulders, even if it had made him all the more afraid of being forced to leave his boys.

Nobody warned you about these things, when you became a parent.

Gyro left after that, saying that the lab should be safe to enter, but Boyd could stay for socializing regardless. Donald nodded, not trusting himself to speak, and Gyro hitched a ride with Launchpad back to the Bin.

Donald went back inside, and found the kids were nowhere to be seen. He considered the possibility that they were up to something, decided so long as it was the Manor it was fine, and instead gathered up his laptop to work on the lesson plans for SHUSH. He also ended up sending an email to Ravenson explaining his encounter with Steelbeak, warning that she might hear this from either Beakley or Scrooge, and that his identity would be compromised if she revealed she had a source. He probably didn't have to do that last part, but eh, paranoia.

What he really needed to do was look into the Phantom Blot issue that Darkwing seemed to be having, but his personal computer didn't have the needed resources, so it would have to wait. It felt like he had been running around constantly since…

Well, since always, really, but more busy since he had rejoined SHUSH. Despite that, he didn't feel exhausted, or defeated, like he had before. Lately he felt excited to get up, to start working on SHUSH training, Paperinik research. Adventures. Even using magic felt less exhausting when he occasionally had to let off excess energy. In all honesty, he felt jittery, eager to do things and talk to people.

Certain people, anyway, he added mentally, when he heard Scrooge re-enter the Manor with a loud greeting. He carefully gathered up his notes into a folder, readying to close the laptop at any moment while he listened.

The kids called out greetings from upstairs but didn't actually come down, which was slightly unusual. Scrooge seemed to agree, when he poked his head into the room, frowning.

"What're the kids up to? Must be something interesting," he asked; something about his tone made Donald bristle, but he wrote it off. Scrooge in general made him bristle, most days. He closed the laptop with a shrug.

"They didn't say." he said casually, putting his things into his bag a bit more forcefully than necessary. He had a good plan for new SHUSH training, and a lot to think about between Gyro and Drake, and it was now truly hitting him how little sleep he had had lately. His mind was running full speed, but as he stood, every limb was aching, and his head felt heavy.

"Ah. Didn't demand answers, eh?" Scrooge teased, stepping properly into the room to give Donald an amused look. Donald shrugged again.

"They weren't planning on leaving the house," he replied, rubbing his face. "I'm trying to leave them be." Scrooge's grin fell off his face, leaving awkwardness in its place. He tapped his fingers along the doorframe behind him.

"Did your get-together with Mallard and Gyro go well?" Scrooge asked, when the silence had dragged too long. "Launchpad mentioned it on the way home." Donald glanced up, and nodded.

“I thought so. He seems nice, and he makes Launchpad happy. Can’t ask for much more,” he said quietly, thoughtfully, “Gosalyn and the kids seemed to get along, but they didn’t stick around for long.”

“Oh? What were they all up to?” Scrooge asked, stepping forward.

“Ah…” Donald trailed off, squinting at him in confusion, “A tour of the house, for the most part. Think they were chatting in Webby’s room after a while.” Lena had at one point snuck down and stolen the sandwich tray from the kitchen, so he knew they ate, but it meant he had no idea what they had been doing at any point.

The silence resumed. Donald made no effort to break it, checking that all of his things were packed neatly into his bag instead.

“I was glad to have you along on our little adventure earlier,” Scrooge finally said, stilted like he had rehearsed. “You should come along more often.” Donald looked at Scrooge, conflicted.

“If I can get time off work, I can come along,” Donald reminded him, “I just need some warning is all.” Not that he couldn’t get away easier, now. SHUSH would probably let it go, if he could make sure any trainees he was supposed to be working with were covered.

He paused, considering his next words.

“I’ve missed adventures too,” Donald added, low enough he wasn’t immediately certain that Scrooge had heard him.

Until he looked up, and saw Scrooge staring at him, and once again, Donald couldn’t place his expression. It reminded him of his face

during adventures, when faced with a puzzle or riddle. Like Donald had said something he needed to crack, coded and hidden in half truths.

It would have been a good opportunity to try and clear the strange air that had taken over their relationship. Donald remembered being close with his uncle once upon a time, but he couldn't properly recall when. He certainly couldn't say when it had died.

But Scrooge shook his head, the expression clearing for his usual smug confidence, and he nodded at Donald once before walking back out of the room, clearly heading towards the stairs. And that was that.

Donald sent his email to Ravenson confirming the schedule and first lesson plan, then shut down his computer and went to sleep. He had a busy week planned, and needed as much rest as he could get.

He got to sleep in at least, no pounding at the door or screaming from the yard. But, being too used to waking to those exact noises, he shot awake by eight and made his way to the Manor, still half asleep. When he arrived, however, he found that six of the kids were asleep in the living room, curled up in sleeping bags strewn around the room. Violet, Lena and Webby, all clustered around each other, and Huey, Louie and Dewey splayed around them like a protective circle, though he doubted that was intentional.

The last sleeping bag was neatly rolled up against the wall, but no Boyd to be seen. He scanned the room, frowning, expecting to find the parrot curled up on the couch instead, but the room was otherwise empty.

Donald stepped back, closing the door gently, tapping his fingers on the doorframe. It was possible Boyd had gone home sometime during the night, but he assumed that either Gyro or Boyd would have said something first.

He was debating asking Duckworth if he had seen Boyd anywhere when he heard some quiet clattering in the kitchen. Inside, he found his missing kid, pulling out a large, teetering pile of dishes and ingredients out of the cabinet. Donald paused a moment, before Parent Instincts kicked in, and he snapped a photo of the scene. At the sound, Boyd turned to look at him, eyes wide.

“Oh! Good morning Mr. Duck! I was going to get everything ready to make pancakes!” Boyd called cheerfully, smiling widely. Donald shook his head, and stepped forward to take the top of the teetering pile before it went crashing down to the floor.

He was intimately familiar with that event.

“Just Donald, Boyd,” he reminded him, but doubted it would stick. Boyd nodded anyway.

“Future rule, please ask an adult before cooking anything. Mrs. Beakley is pretty particular about that one, and so am I,” he continued, sorting out the items on the counter. Huey preferred fruit jam instead of syrup, Lena liked dark chocolate or something bitter, Webby would ask for sprinkles. He added these things to the pile as he thought, while Boyd’s eyes followed him closely.

“Of course! I wasn’t going to start yet, but since I was awake I thought I could help with the preparations so you could sleep!” Boyd explained, and Donald smiled widely at him.

“I appreciate it,” he replied, and gestured to the table, “Would you like to help? Since you’re awake.” Boyd’s face lit up (metaphorically; Donald had no idea if he could do that literally), and he darted forward, peering up at the counter.

“Huey said you know- I mean,” he said hesitantly, tapping his hands on the counter that he could barely reach, “I’m a definitely real boy, but you know that I’m a robot?” He looked up at Donald with big, earnest eyes. Donald nodded, and if anything Boyd’s face got even brighter, as he shot up to hover at counter height, feet lit up with some kind of rocket.

“Yes, I know. Speaking of, can I ask how long you’ve been awake? I don’t know how much sleep you need,” Donald asked, handing him the flour to measure while he counted eggs.

If he had had any doubts about Boyd being ‘a definitely real boy,’ the look of nervous guilt would have confirmed it. He had seen it on so many children’s faces in his life; it was always the same darting eyes, beak pressed together, hands fiddling and usually a stutter or word vomit of explanations.

“Um…” Or awkward silence; Donald shook his head, amused.

“I’ll let it go this time, but you should make sure to get a full night’s rest; it’s important for your health,” Donald told him, tapping him on his beak; Boyd went cross eyed to watch his finger, looking bemused and delighted at once. He nodded seriously.

“Of course Mr. Donald!” Eh, good enough. Donald handed over the bowl of ingredients.

“Go ahead and mix that, okay? Carefully, and stop as soon as it looks

like everything is combined smoothly," Donald told him, and went to get the pan from the pile of utensils still on the table.

Boyd, thankfully, used the whisk instead of some kind of mixer attachment, something Donald had had to convince Uno was probably not sanitary for food preparation. Maybe it was different if you could actually eat the food.

"Can I ask you a question?" Boyd asked, into the early morning silence when he was done mixing. Donald hummed an affirmative.

"I might have overheard part of your conversation with Dr. Dadloose," Boyd continued. Donald wanted to immediately text Gyro about his new title, but held off the urge to glance at Boyd, who was watching him closely. He seemed to take the eye-contact as permission to continue.

"Did you really mean it? That you would be my emergency guardian?" He asked, big eyes scanning him for- something. Donald could guess, he knew most of the child's history, and turned to face him fully so he could be clear.

"I would never agree if I wasn't completely certain," he said slowly, carefully, making sure Boyd's eyes didn't leave his. "You deserve a home, and if at any point Gyro isn't able to provide that, I will step in. No matter what, no matter when." He wanted to continue, but he was cut off by a armful of feathers, small arms reaching to squeeze around his ribs like iron bands. He let out a breath, and reached down to hug him back.

There were other things that needed to eventually be said; some emotional, some informative, but for now, they just stood in the quiet early morning air, the smell of vanilla and flour in the air.

Eventually, later, the other kids would be awake, storm in and demand their different toppings and combinations, Donald would take requests for pancake shapes (they weren't great, but he tried), Bentina would emerge and sigh but not stop him from cooking despite her clear distaste for anyone being in her kitchen. Later, Scrooge would poke his head in and be all but dragged into the kitchen to have breakfast as a family, and Della would emerge from her room with her hair all at ends, demanding blueberry pancakes shaped like strawberries.

Later, Donald would step back to tidy up, and the kids would all insist they would handle it. He would lean back, brimming with pride and simple joy while they squabbled over dish soap and leftovers. He would catch Della peering in through the doorway, eyes completely enamored and meet her eye with a shared smile.

Later, he would send the photo of Boyd to Gyro, and get a series of key smashes back before a simple *'thank you'* in return.

But for now, he focused on the weight of a small, hurt child in his arms, trying to see if he could squeeze the loneliness out of him, replace it with affection and good memories instead. It certainly couldn't hurt to try.

Interlude: The Trainees

The email was sent at 5 PM Friday evening, to a small number of chosen individuals around the world.

Time: Monday, 7 AM

Location: Room 205, Duckburg Base

Assignment: Enter the classroom, without being caught by the instructor, at 7 AM. Points will be deducted for any permanent damages to the building or furniture.

Senior Trainee Agent 720 had read the email a few times already, squinting at it with some confusion, until she confirmed yes, that was all the direction she had been given. No instructor name, no supplies listed, it didn't even clarify what they were supposed to be studying.

She had checked with Senior Agent RN, who confirmed she was slated for a new training course, but either could not or would not give any other details. She was also not permitted to know who else would be in the class, so there was no ability to compare notes.

Was it an infiltration class? She hadn't had any proper field work or training yet, so that would make sense. But the lack of detail was odd, compared to her previous courses and trainers. Agent RN had always provided full itineraries, recommended and required supplies, and would respond to questions quickly and efficiently. She had attempted to email back for further information, but got no response.

It was Monday now, 6 AM, and she was hanging outside the windows

of the classroom from the outside, a backpack over her shoulder. The borrowed harness and ropes didn't fit quite right, but they were fine for the moment. One window was open to allow a breeze, and she couldn't see anyone inside despite the lights being on. She carefully slid the window further open, then slid silently inside, looking at a large conference room, with a whiteboard on one wall. Then she took a step, and tripped when one foot stuck to the floor.

"Agent 720, you're the first. Please take a seat, when you've freed yourself," a mild voice spoke from the corner of the room, where a tall fake plant had hidden a duck in a smart suit, a bag over his shoulder.

720 let out a groan, before she caught herself and went silent again, pulling herself up. Glancing at the floor, she realized it was lined with some kind of tape, sticky side up, along the floor all around the window.

Face burning, she took a seat near the back, watching as the other duck, presumably their instructor, set his bag down and looked up at her. Off hand she would guess he was in his mid thirties or forties, and had a giant thermos of coffee in his free hand.

"There's a cantina down the hall, if you want anything," he offered, "I would ask you not to mention anything to any of your other trainees, if you run into any." Ask, she noted, as she nodded sheepishly and stood. Ask, not order, or demand. It was interesting.

It was only on her way back, coffee in one hand and a cheap danish in the other, that she realized she hadn't asked his name yet.

Re-entering the room, though, she found three new people in the room, two bull dogs and a pigeon, each looking as embarrassed as she had. One of the bull dogs was being untied by their instructor, from a rope trap that was attached to the ceiling.

She hadn't even seen it when she had walked out.

They sat in silence; 720 felt far too awkward to say anything, while their instructor looked distracted. She would have thought he was partially asleep, if he didn't catch every single other trainee as they tried to come in.

A few others went for the window, either not seeing their instructor or planning to slip in when he was turned away. He politely turned until they got stuck, tripped over a wire, or just turned around when they were halfway over the sill with a raised brow.

As it got closer to start time, a few others tried to come through the door, slipping through the door frame and trying to slide around the room to hide behind the table. The only person that hadn't been caught by the rope trap had been a tabby that the instructor nodded at in approval before she sat down.

At 6:58 AM, the instructor stood and walked to the open door, stepping around the rope trap and peering down the hallway one way, then the other.

A sprinkling of dust fell onto her shoulders; she glanced up, and blinked at a ceiling tile sliding rapidly to the side, before a chicken slid into the opening and fell to the ground, only just landing on his feet with a slight thud. He glanced at his watch, and grinned widely, while their instructor whirled around.

"Agent 330," their instructor greeted, and to 720's surprise his face split into a smile as well, "good morning, and good job. You're the only one that passed today." The chicken, apparently 330, shook

debris from his shoulders.

“Good morning Agent Double Duck!” He replied cheerfully.

Double Duck?!?

720 could tell the rest of the room was feeling the same shock as she was, some visibly shooting up in their seats to stare at the duck now watching them all from the front of the room, arms folded.

“ *You’re* Double Duck?” The tabby screeched, fur standing up on end.

“Isn’t Double Duck dead?” Another voice asked quietly, so 720 didn’t see who it was.

“No, but he retired years ago,” one of the beagles replied a bit too loudly. Double Duck watched them all patiently, while the chatter slowly died as they remembered they were in training for spy work, not gossip.

“Yes, I’m Double Duck. No, I’m not dead, and yes, I was retired. I was asked to come back in and decided to do so. No, I will not be discussing where I was or what I was doing during that time. Any other immediate questions?” He asked, and 720’s hand shot up before she could stop herself.

“Yes?”

“Why was the assignment to sneak into the classroom?” She asked,

and winced internally at her tone. He didn't seem bothered regardless, but she could feel the eyes of some of the other trainees.

"You're being trained as intelligence agents," Double Duck observed, "so first I'd like to hear what your plan was and what you think the point was. I'll explain after everyone else has gone." He gave her an encouraging look, and she winced again to realize she had inadvertently volunteered to go first.

"Well, I assumed it was a basic infiltration mission," she started, rubbing her hands on her thighs, "so I went for the window since it was the less observable path. There were too many hallways inside to navigate and risk being seen." Double Duck nodded.

"Where do you think you went wrong?" He asked, and she paused, pressing her bill together.

"I didn't fully clear the room before I entered," she finally replied, "and I didn't see the tape by the window when I entered." He nodded, but didn't add anything, instead turning to the next person around the table.

Overall, everyone had assumed the test was infiltration, and gave similar thoughts to entering through the window or sneaking through the doorway. He was clearly saving Agent 330 for last, and didn't offer any commentary, only asking additional questions when someone was vague. 720 had at this point taken out a notebook, but since there had only been three different approaches, she hadn't written anything down yet.

Finally it was 330's turn, and she tuned in closely, as did most of the class, given he was the only one that had, apparently, passed.

“The email said to enter the classroom at 7 AM, not before or by 7 AM, so I took that to mean that I couldn’t arrive early, which would have been my first impulse. So I determined the best method of following the directive would be to come in from above, and spent the morning infiltrating from the ceiling,” 330 explained, back straight, hands folded on the table in front of him.

Double Duck nodded, then made a ‘go on’ gesture with one hand.

“And my interpretation of the lesson was that it was more to give our instructor information on how we approached an issue, not a straight lesson,” 330 continued with a shrug, and 720’s eyes darted back to Double Duck, who smiled, clearly pleased.

“You’re mostly correct. This was to test you all and to give me an idea how you all approach a mission,” Double Duck explained, and he gestured to the room at large.

“Before I get into it, anyone want to comment on anyone else’s approach?” He asked. Nobody spoke right away. Duck sighed.

“Remember, this isn’t a school, this is training for a very dangerous job,” he told them, eyes deadly serious. “The people around you will be your mission partners, maybe your handlers or contacts. You will be working closely together, and you need to trust each other. Right now, that means trusting you can ask questions, no matter how silly they might seem to you, and feeling comfortable telling someone if you think they’re wrong.” Here he stopped, and didn’t speak. 720 realized, after another moment, he probably wouldn’t speak until they had said something.

So she took a breath and turned to 330.

“What made you decide to approach from the ceiling? Instead of another entrance, I mean,” she asked, and he turned to grin at her.

“I heard from a fairly reliable source that most people don’t think to look up,” he said cheekily, and grinned widely when Double Duck snorted. Neither clarified that comment though, so she persevered, glancing at Double Duck as well.

“Were we supposed to arrive exactly at seven? I didn’t see that in the email,” she continued, and Double Duck nodded.

“I wanted to see how closely you would read the message. When things seem obvious, you’re likely to miss something because you assumed part of the meaning. Make sure you’re always actually reading your mission briefs, even if they seem simple.”

“How did you even get into the ceiling?” A parrot demanded next.

“There’s a maintenance closet down the hall that had access. I crawled from there,” 330 explained, “The tiles themselves can’t support weight, so I had to use the ceiling supports or the wall structures.”

There were a few other questions asked after that, mostly confirming how everyone had climbed the building, or gone through the halls when they weren’t sure who they needed to avoid. Double Duck nodded as they talked, and when they went silent this time he coughed quietly.

“Alright, so let me start by saying that I got your emails with questions, but there are times that I will expect you to solve the issue yourself or as a group, like today. In the future I will say that,” Double Duck began, tapping his fingers absently on the table.

“Some of you asked what I’m training you in,” he continued, “and I am going to be completely honest, this isn’t a single topic. This is the final full training course you will complete before going out in the field. My job is making sure you’re as ready as we can get you. So we’re going to cover anything I think you need more training with.”

“So,” he added, looking at them each in turn, “if you have anything you want to cover or get more help on, please let me know and I’ll incorporate it. The goal here is to make sure you don’t die when we let you out to work, not to worry about grades or performance reviews. If you don’t think you can do something, you tell someone and we make sure you can handle it.”

He pressed his beak together, tapping again on the table, eyes going slightly distant, before they came back to the table.

“Any questions so far?” He asked, and a dozen hands shot up.

“Why did you retire?” Someone called from the back. Double Duck frowned, glaring at whoever had spoken.

“Like I said, I’m not here to discuss my personal life,” he growled out, and a few hands went down. He continued to scowl, but nodded at another trainee; 720 didn’t turn to look, wanting to minimize how much attention she gained.

After basic training, which had been, to her knowledge, intended to weed out recruits that couldn’t handle things, they hadn’t had any group training courses like this; SHUSH tended to pair off trainees with more experienced agents instead. Groups were usually refreshers or updates depending on new technology. So the fact that they were being all trained together, by one previously retired agent, made her

nervous. Her best guess was that new agents were failing at something badly enough, and consistently enough, that SHUSH was desperate to fix it. Or, possibly, that there was a reason it needed to be fixed *quickly*.

Neither was a comforting thought.

Or she could be overthinking the issue, honestly, but in training so far she had been taught to consider all possibilities.

720 tuned back into the conversation, hoping she hadn't missed anything.

"We'll meet on as regular a schedule as I can manage, under the circumstances. The plan is every other day for the first few weeks, then it's up in the air. There's always the chance that I'll be pulled for a mission, so keep that in mind. We don't exactly have substitute teachers here," he grinned as he spoke, but only 330 laughed.

"Keep an eye on your email, that's primarily how I'll keep in contact," he continued, then glanced at the clock. 720 did as well, and blinked, baffled that most of the day had gone by.

"Any final questions?" Double Duck asked, and 330 piped up, looking eager.

"How would you have completed today's assignment?" He asked, and the room visibly perked up, leaning in to Double Duck, who gave 330 an amused look.

"Broken in early and barricaded the door," he said casually, like it was

nothing at all.

When 720 checked her email the next morning for Wednesday's meeting, she saw that the assignment was the exact same task, into a new room. She felt a terrible idea cross her mind.

The door rattled, and 720 hid her victorious grin. They had all contacted each other after class, determined to get a win against Double Duck, who half the class had on a pedestal so high he could only tumble, and the other half figured he was a relic, brought in because SHUSH didn't like their trainees not having classic skills. No matter how useless they would clearly prove to be, in the digital age.

For her part, 720 kept her opinions to herself, but eyed 330 suspiciously. He had clearly worked with Double Duck before, at least enough to build some rapport. The fact that he was in the class at all, and apparently eager, gave her the impression that Double Duck had something useful to teach them.

The remaining trainees were checking over their barricade carefully, looking over each piece of furniture with close attention. They were nervous, hands tapping and tugging on various chairs in the stack. 720 understood the nerves; the email had no rules, no limits, so they had decided to use Double Duck's flippant suggestion, but now they all seemed to be collectively wondering if that had been an implicit rule.

The clock on the wall ticked closer and closer to seven. The only person missing was Double Duck, and everyone was getting tense as the class start time was approaching.

This room was similar to the previous one; one wall of windows, bland decor and a large table in the center of the room. Unlike the previous one, there was a storage room attached to theirs, with no

exterior access, full of pens and other basic office supplies. 720 had to assume that somewhere the building had the actual spy equipment that SHUSH supplied their staff, but everywhere she had been given permission to go so far had looked like any normal office building.

The rattling at the door had stopped, and instead there was low-pitched swearing and grumbling coming through the door. It could be Double Duck, but with no window to the hallway they couldn't be sure. 720 wished she had some of her gear to check for body heat at least, but had assumed that outside resources weren't allowed. That was the standard in her other courses.

The clock read 6:57. 330 was looking around suspiciously, squinting at the walls and windows. His fingers tapped along the surfaces he passed, in some pattern 720 couldn't identify. He abruptly seemed to tense and moved faster.

The clock moved to 6:58, and there was a shout at the door. Unbidden, her eyes snapped to the door.

"Good teamwork everyone," Double Duck said from behind them all, closing the supply closet door, "But remember to clear the room entirely next time, and keep an eye on all possible entrances if you aren't familiar with the building layout." So saying, he walked forward to set his bag and coffee thermos on the table, glancing at the barricade with mild interest. 720 felt frozen, uncomprehending.

"Well built, but securing it to the walls would make it harder to remove; rope or wire maybe," he added, removing one of the chairs and dragging it back to the table to sit down.

Slowly, stiffly, they all shuffled to dismantle the rest of the barricade and set the chairs back around the table. 330 opened the door when they were done, and came back with a tape recorder. Double Duck

nodded in thanks when he was handed the device, shoving it into his bag.

“But how did you get inside?” One of the other trainees asked, 720 was pretty sure it was Trainee LD4, staring at Double Duck with complete confusion. They hadn’t sat down yet, staring at the supply closet. “We checked that room, it’s just a closet!”

Double Duck raised an eyebrow, glancing at LD4. Then he continued to look around the rest of the room.

“Why don’t you all work together to figure that out?” He offered, slurping coffee from his thermos, and leaning back in his chair.

Alright, 720 kind of hated him.

After finding the hollow wall that, apparently, hid a secret corridor inside the supply closet, that not a single one of them had seen when they had inspected the room before, Double Duck rolled into a full explanation for how to find such places, using no tools or gear. Apparently this entire floor of the building was fitted with all manner of corridors, rooms, entrances, even small cubbies and safes. Most were for training, a few were actually meant for if the facility was invaded or compromised, according to Double Duck.

“Why wouldn’t we just use a scanner?” Another trainee, BB4 asked with a scoff. Double Duck gave him a bored look.

“Why didn’t you bring one to class?” he countered, and BB4 looked indignant.

“You didn’t say we could bring supplies to class!” He protested, and their instructor rolled his eyes. 720 felt her face go slightly red, despite not speaking.

“I never said you couldn’t, either. This isn’t elementary school, you can bring a calculator to class.”

“That being said,” he continued, less flippantly, “outside of training there are no guarantees you *will* have those things, so learn how to do without. Anything you need a tool for is something you can’t do in a lot of missions.” He tapped along the wall, pausing so they could clearly hear the hollow sound behind it.

“Why wouldn’t we have our gear? SHUSH budget cuts?” Someone joked from the back of the group. Duck stopped entirely to turn to look at them all, arms crossed. One fist was clenched, and his face was cold.

“Or you were captured and stripped of your gear,” he offered, and his tone was tight and low. “Or you were under cover and had to go in with minimal equipment. Or there was an EMP, or your scanner is out of power, or has a cracked screen, or any of a *thousand* possible options!” His voice rose in volume until he was nearly yelling. His face twisted, just a bit, before he visibly took a breath and calmed down.

“If you know how to do everything with just your hands, if you can get things done without gear, without instructions, you can get through the mission alive,” he explained, taking another breath, and his eyes seemed to linger, just a moment longer, on 330.

“My job is to make sure you all keep coming back alive,” he continued, rubbing the back of his neck distractedly. His cuff fell just

a bit down his wrist, and 720 caught a glimpse of thick white bandages underneath. He didn't seem inhibited by them.

There was a long moment of silence, where nobody looked at each other. After waiting a moment, Duck continued to explain signs of hidden cubbies, rooms and hallways, leading them out of the room like a group of ducklings.

One of the cubbies held a business card; Double Duck glanced at it, snorted, and wrote something on the back before putting it in his pocket.

"Old training game," he explained, but didn't provide further details; 720 immediately decided to wander around and find other notes to see if she could figure out the rules.

Hidden in another room, there were posters and comfy chairs; there was even a mini-fridge. This, Duck didn't bother saying a word about, just pointed out the hidden hinges and magnetic latch he'd been able to trigger.

He said nothing when they all snooped in the fridge (it was empty), just led the way to the cantina on this floor without a word.

Fine, she didn't completely hate him.

Their lesson for the next week was the same, with another new room, giving them the weekend to plan another approach. The email they got this time had one additional line that had caught her attention

right away.

Prizes will be given for the best attempts. Impress me

720 felt genuinely excited this time, already planning.

Investigating the Phantom Blot

Officially speaking, Donald was at work. To his family, he was working at his research trainer position. But his SHUSH training courses were only every other day; he used the off time to either grade items, or decide what topics they were going to cover next time.

But honestly, they were progressing just fine, and he didn't have anything to prepare at this moment, so instead, he had gone to Ducklair Tower to continue looking into the Phantom Blot crimes. Darkwing, via Launchpad's texts, had sent all the thefts he was concerned about, but the new ones didn't lend any further information. Honestly, Donald had the same issues he had had with the original ones: the ones at verified locations weren't going to have any magical energy to work with, and any that were smuggled or stolen entirely couldn't be examined.

He had managed a trip to St. Canard to inspect the items that were still at the museum, but nothing in the building seemed to have any magic at all. There wasn't any sign they had been drained by any of the Blot's old technology, but something was still bothering him about the whole thing.

If someone was trying to recreate the Blot's original crimes, why not target the same artifacts as the first time? Very few people were aware of exactly what the Blot had been working on, so anyone trying to copy him wouldn't necessarily know what artifacts had been useful to that plan. The Blot himself hadn't actually recognized what was magical and what wasn't. While he hated magic and magic users and wanted all aspects of the supernatural wiped from the planet, he had no training in the topic and no way of telling a genuine artifact from a forgery.

So he had thrown his net wide, targeting anyone from fortune tellers to stage magicians, and any artifact that was ever used in ritualistic or religious ceremonies. He'd accumulated power slowly and targeted a

lot of non-magical people and items as a result. It would be easy, practically inevitable, for someone copying a series of crimes that they didn't fully understand the reasoning for to end up going for the same artifacts.

Yet, this person wasn't. There wasn't a single repeat. There had also been no attacks on any magic users, or apparent ones. And the Blot had committed a wide series of other crimes, mostly thefts and smuggling, to raise funds and disguise his true goals. Yet there were no significant increases in those avenues that he could find.

Was he over-thinking this? Darkwing had specifically named the Phantom Blot as a potential inspiration, but they could both be overreacting. On the other hand, if there was no connection, what was the point of the break-ins?

Donald went back to the computer and pulled up the security footage of the thefts, but all he could really see was a tall, dark figure approaching various artifacts and displays, then eventually leaving without actually stealing anything. The footage was also distorted to the point that the figure couldn't really be seen, but even when he tried to enhance or clean it up, he couldn't get anything.

Was the figure looking at the displays? Or the description? But then why break in? Museums were open to the public, if they weren't going to steal anything why go to all the trouble of breaking in? Had they left something on the display? Maybe they should check for anything left behind; he made a note of that, but would need to talk to Darkwing first, really.

That was its own issue. When it came to vigilante work, he was used to working alone or with a team, but he was always an equal. This was Darkwing's case. Paperinik was retired. He needed to not take over, especially not because he just… usually was in charge. He had only really worked with Uno on a regular basis; Lyla and the Time Police had been a more occasional thing, for time pirates or the

Evronian invasion. In short, he needed to remember that in this case, Darkwing was in charge, and he was the interloper if he jumped too far in.

He shot a text to Launchpad to ask Darkwing to meet 'PK' when he was available, and debated seeing if they could just get communicators. He wasn't tech-savvy enough to set anything up though, short of just having two phones. Which was… not the most subtle method of communication, honestly, and Donald didn't trust himself enough not to mix them up.

Well, Darkwing seemed to have a decent array of gear, maybe he had some idea. This method of communication was already making things difficult just to assist with this case, and if it became a regular thing?

Of course, Donald was retired from this. This job, at least, he was done with. But he would admit he missed it; this was the only thing he had purely chosen for himself. SHUSH had sought him out, and both the events of Kingdom Hearts and the Three Caballeros had chosen him, in some way. But Paperinik? That had just been him, purely Donald's choices and yes, he would admit he missed it.

But he needed to be realistic, and even if his schedule wasn't full of dealing with SHUSH and preparing new agents for a potential FOWL resurgence, as well as more adventures with the family, he wasn't needed. Duckburg had Gizmoduck, and St. Canard had Darkwing. Sure, neither could handle every single crime, but they didn't need another hero, really. Heroes were for unusual cases, to react immediately because they were there faster than the police or to deal with supervillains. He wasn't *needed* , so no matter how much he missed swinging around he needed to stay grounded.

His phone went off; Launchpad passing along that Darkwing was available right now, if he liked, and if so PK could head to this specific address. Donald glanced around at his work, but he was, realistically, free.

So not quite as grounded as all that, but it was just for this mission, then he was back to hero retirement.

The address led to an old movie theater downtown, which was all but deserted on a weekday, and had a large elaborate sign on the roof that would easily hide two heroes meeting there. Donald landed silently, glancing around to confirm nobody had seen him there, and wondered if anyone would be able to tell him and Darkwing apart even if he was spotted. Dark capes swinging around on grapple lines weren't easy to tell apart from a brief glance at a distance.

And nobody expected him to be up and about. Hell, most of Duckburg thought he was dead.

He hoped that Stefan and Lyla had done alright after his disappearance. He had warned them that he had wanted to quietly retire when he was done, but hadn't had a chance to reach out when he had actually done so. He was certain that Lyla had known his real identity, but they had never truly spoken about it.

Maybe he should reach out, especially if he was going to be out occasionally. Even retired, he was sure they both would be furious with him if they didn't get advance warning. Or maybe, if he was being optimistic, they might be happy to see him. Well, if they were still around; last he'd heard Lyla was going back to her own time before time travel was banned, and Stefan had just… left. Gone traveling, as far as Donald knew.

Distracted by this line of thought, he missed Darkwing's arrival until the man was standing in front of him, cape still fluttering from his landing. He let out an aborted shout, throwing a punch at the other duck's face. Darkwing jumped back in time to dodge, but nearly tripped over his own cape. After a moment he stood straight again.

“Eh, sorry! Didn’t mean to startle you!” He said awkwardly, while Donald shook his head ruefully.

“Sorry for nearly hitting you,” he replied gruffly, pulling himself together to step forward. The other hero looked tired, Donald thought, but it was hard to tell under the mask. Darkwing’s suit bulged a bit in places, like there were bandages hidden underneath, and he moved stiffly.

“I wanted to know if you found any more information about the museum break-ins,” Donald started, focusing on the task at hand. Darkwing blinked at him once, then shook his head.

“Nothing. I went to the museums to see if there was anything that we couldn’t see on camera, but there was nothing. No fingerprints, no feathers or fur left behind, nothing. The staff at the museum is pretty disinterested in the whole thing, they figure it was some kids pulling off a dare,” Darkwing scoffed, crossing his arms in irritation.

Donald considered that possibility, but with the strange video distortion and the smuggling he was more inclined to think there was something more to it. He tapped his fingers absently on the wall behind him.

“Have you had any luck getting at the Blot in prison?” He asked, and Darkwing shook his head.

“I reached out to that agent, like you suggested, but they didn’t get anywhere. Said they didn’t have the right access and would have to request it, haven’t heard back since. Heh, who knew spy agencies had so much bureaucracy?” Darkwing joked.

Donald. Donald knew that. SHUSH was more paperwork and procedures than missions lately, it seemed. So he would probably have to subtly get that information cleared to go back to Darkwing without anyone realizing it.

Would it be easier to just break into the prison himself?

He… probably wasn't getting enough sleep if that seemed reasonable to him.

"You said he was trying to build some super weapon, right? Would anyone have access to his work, be trying to recreate it?" Donald shook his head.

"He had no partners, or even employees, that knew what his plans were. None of his subordinates were working on the device itself, just the heists. As far as any of them knew, the Blot was just a mob boss with a weird gimmick," Donald explained. "Nobody even had access to the lab he was working in." Darkwing's beak twisted to the side.

"I noticed this copycat hasn't gone after any artifacts that the Blot did; absolutely no crossover. What do you make of that?" He asked.

Donald continued tapping his fingers, considering his words carefully.

"Two theories right now," he finally said slowly, "either our copycat is trying to continue the Blot's work in some way and is just skipping the ones he already stole, or they're somehow aware that all the artifacts that the Blot originally went after are useless now." Darkwing squinted at him.

“Useless?”

“Drained of magic,” Donald explained, internally preparing for Darkwing’s skepticism, “When I took down the Blot, we were able to reverse some of the effects on his victims, but the objects didn’t take any of their original magic back. So, they’re no longer useful as a power source.”

“What concerns me,” he added, “is that we never let that information go public, specifically to avoid copycats. The device he was building was already powerful enough to level a city block, and he was barely started; I really didn’t want someone else getting the same idea.”

Darkwing took a breath, raising a hand.

“Okay, question: there were living victims of this… magic draining plan?” He said dubiously, holding up one finger. Donald nodded.

“He attacked and kidnapped people he believed had magical abilities. Some did, others didn’t; the Blot has no magical abilities himself, so he was just guessing based on appearances.” His hidden base had had dozens of people imprisoned inside, and some hadn’t survived the magical draining process.

“Could one of his victims have decided to try the same thing? Sounds like he wasn’t a ‘magical’ expert, but some of those victims would have an idea how to continue his work, right?” Donald considered, then waved his hand in a ‘sorta’ waggle.

“It’s possible; for any of them that did have magical talent, there would be easier ways than stealing artifacts, and they would have to come up with a new way of harnessing that power. But it would answer some questions, for sure,” Donald confirmed. “I’ll get a list

together of everyone that was involved.” Darkwing nodded, looking conflicted

“I still don’t buy this whole… magic thing, seems like people just not understanding technology. But!” He held up a finger at Donald’s exasperated face, “I will… admit that you seem convinced, and at least well acquainted with whatever was considered magical in this case. So, if I could…” he paused, frustrated.

“I would appreciate your input on this; what victims were, eh… magically talented, what artifacts the Blot was actually able to use, things like that.” Here he paused again, and didn’t continue. His face was frustrated, and his fists clenched.

Donald waited, confused.

“It would be easier if we could meet or communicate more privately,” Darkwing finally said, scowling. He rubbed his face.

“I know you preferred to keep our communications limited,” he continued, (so he had realized Donald had lied through his beak about not having a phone, Donald realized with a laugh), “and I intended to follow that, and definitely am not incredibly excited to work with you directly! I mean, I am, but I am also respectful of boundaries!” A pause, where Donald struggled not to react. Mostly because he had no idea how to.

“Anyway,” Darkwing continued, coughing awkwardly into his fist, “it would be incredibly helpful if you could assist in going over some of the details of the Blot’s case, since there still seems to be a connection between them. But we would likely have to find a better way of communicating and meeting.”

Donald took a breath, held it. There was an obvious answer here. The 151st floor. It was his base of operations. It held all the information from the original case. It was completely private, something Donald couldn't swear about anywhere else, even Darkwing's own base (if he had one; he had to, right?). It would be better for Donald to pick the location, to protect his identity.

But.

But it was Uno's home. Donald had never once brought someone there without Uno's permission.

Uno had been gone, deactivated, for so many years, and Donald had full access to the security protocols. He could let Darkwing inside if needed.

It was Uno's home.

He couldn't do it.

"Do you have somewhere in mind?"

As it turned out, Darkwing did not. Or, to be fair, he did, but then backtracked, face twisting. He'd been fairly trusting of Donald so far, but allowing him into his base of operations was apparently too much. Which was fair enough, but it left them going over the Blot's original victims on the rooftop, occasionally peering over the edge to check if they had been seen. Darkwing had brought a notebook with him, apparently, and was taking carefully coded notes.

Donald was pulling the list of previous victims off of his shield when

he caught a whirring noise, and glanced up.

Darkwing groaned, while Gizmoduck descended to the rooftop with a puzzled grin. While Darkwing scrambled to gather up his notes and things, Gizmoduck landed, heavily, on the roof, his one wheel rocking back and forth until he caught his balance.

It was the first time Donald had been close to the armor (discluding the time he had fought Gizmoduck's shadow inside it; he had been distracted at the time), and he took the opportunity to look closer.

While impressive, the armor had clearly seen recent combat; it was dented, scratched and even scorched in places. There were signs that someone may have tried to pry it off of him? Or maybe it had been an emergency removal, hard to say.

Gizmoduck was talking.

"Darkwing! I thought that was you! What a surprise to find you here in Duckburg! Especially during the day… huh," he slowed down, looking around.

"What, er… what *are* you doing here? On the roof of the movie theater?" He glanced around again, and this time his eyes landed on Donald, who gave a half-hearted wave. Gizmoduck frowned, head tilting slightly to the side.

"Er, hello citizen…?" Donald stared at him, then looked around himself. True, he hadn't been active in a while, but did Gizmoduck really think he was a random civilian? He was wearing a mask! And a cape!

Darkwing let out an exasperated huff, standing straight and pointing at Donald dramatically.

“This, you overgrown tin can, is *Paperinik,* ” he declared in a pompous tone. Gizmoduck stared; Donald got the impression he was blinking in confusion behind the visor.

“And… that is? Someone else from your show?” Gizmo asked, and Donald slapped a hand to his beak to stifle a snort of laughter while Darkwing let out an affronted shriek.

Should he be offended? Maybe, but watching Darkwing flip his lid at the complete lack of understanding of a brilliant show, and a true inspiration, and so on, was more than making up for the hit to his ego. So he leaned back against the wall instead and let Darkwing yell.

He had to admit, Darkwing knew a lot of his history. Some of which Donald couldn’t recall making it to the news. Huh. That was interesting. Gizmoduck continued to look lost, looking between Donald and Darkwing with an embarrassed frown.

“Wait, you mean the Duck Avenger?”

Now Donald was groaning, slumping against the wall with a scowl.

“You’re both lucky that you didn’t get an Angus Fangus,” he said to the sky, rubbing his face with one hand. “Newspaper calls you something once and it will stick with you forever. Although, I wasn’t exactly giving interviews to correct people.” There had been an active order for his arrest at the time, after all. Gizmoduck looked oddly chagrined at that.

“Right. Well, it is certainly good to meet you, Paperinik. Er… what are you doing here, though? On the roof?” He gestured around them vaguely. Donald glanced at Darkwing, making a small gesture. His case, his call. Darkwing held out to Gizmoduck’s inquisitive expression for a moment, before sighing.

“We were discussing an old case of Paperinik’s, and this was convenient. Nothing to be concerned about,” Darkwing finally grumbled dismissively. He had gone back to his notes, straightening the crumpled pages out roughly, while Gizmoduck’s face lit up, hands flailing to his sides.

“Oh! You can use the lab at the MoneyBin if you’d like! It’s secure, and that way you aren’t on a public building!” He exclaimed, then fell back slightly at Darkwing’s dark look, hands dropping to his sides.

“No, we’re fine, thanks!” Darkwing exclaimed, giving a sharp chopping motion. Donald nodded once, less harshly. Gizmoduck looked put out.

“Scrooge and I didn’t really get along, back in the day,” Donald explained, considering the various pranks he had pulled in his early days (and his… less early days; so sue him, his uncle was infuriating sometimes! And while Donald could rarely get back at him, PK could).

“I’d prefer him continuing to think I’m dead,” he continued; Darkwing winced, while Gizmo’s entire face twitched.

“Yes, well, Mr. McDuck does frequently… hold his grudges,” Gizmoduck said awkwardly, rubbing the back of his head.

“I think we were about wrapped up for the night anyway,” Darkwing

said after a moment, glancing down at his notes. “I’m planning on reaching out to some of these previous victims, see if anyone has been bothering them. Maybe there’s some crossover on that end.” He was turned away from Gizmoduck entirely, who was rocking back and forth on his wheel slightly. Donald gave him an apologetic look.

“Fair warning, a lot of them went into hiding, so I don’t know who all will be reachable. I’ll let you know if I come across anything else,” Donald replied. The sun was nearly set now, leaving long deep shadows across the rooftop. It highlighted how well the color of Darkwing’s cape blended in; even without effort, he was only just visible. Gizmoduck, in direct contrast, was a gleaming giant of white metal.

“Yes, thank you,” Darkwing replied, glancing up at the sky. Given he lived in St. Canard, Donald had to wonder how he traveled across the bay. Grapple lines were well and good for within the city itself, but wasn’t a great option for crossing the bridge. Maybe he had a car? Or a plane?

Donald had a flying car, technically, when he was active. The 313 had been put into storage when the boys had hatched though, the backseat couldn’t contain 3 carseats, and had too many buttons and dangerous buttons and levers to risk having kids inside even now.

That would be one way to reveal his identity. He could hardly imagine Della and Scrooge’s reactions if they realized he’d had a car that could fly since high school.

“Ah, well, I’ll take off I suppose. Nice to meet you Mr. Paperinik!” Gizmoduck said cheerfully, holding out his hand.

“Likewise,” Donald replied, shaking his hand. His grip was solid, and his arm steady despite the sheer weight of the armor. There were

dents in the palm of the hand.

He turned to their companion, but Darkwing was already waving him off.

“Yes, yes, thank you for visiting. Good luck with your next rescue,” he said dismissively, looking through his pouch of notes carefully. He continued to stare at them until Gizmoduck took off.

“Not a fan?” Donald asked, as Darkwing suspiciously looked up, then closed the pouch with a scowl.

“I don’t trust him. Sponsored heroes? Psh, way to sell out immediately to the exact kind of people we’re supposed to be fighting against!” Darkwing snapped, crossing his arms with a derisive snort.

Well. Fair enough.

The Band gets a Fan

Getting a dozen texts from Dewey throughout the day wasn't unusual, as a general rule. He got excited about something and immediately had to share it, no matter that Donald wouldn't be off of work for a few hours. It made him smile, honestly, after he was done with the initial panic that this time, somehow, it would be an emergency that *only* Dewey had thought to tell him about.

It hadn't happened yet. But still, every time.

This time, though, Dewey was just asking him to pick up a rather… specific list of ingredients that Bentina didn't have in the house. Nothing dangerous, but he couldn't imagine what exactly Dewey intended to cook with chicken, pepperoni, lemon juice, bacon, and so on.

On the one hand, it was likely to be an abomination of a food if this was all going into one recipe. On the other hand, he was trying not to hover so much, and nothing here should be dangerous so long as it was cooked correctly, so…

It should be fine. He'd check the recipe first, maybe? No, it was fine.

Why did it need barbeque sauce *and* marinara?

This felt like a waste of food.

Lost in thought, he didn't notice the teenager hesitantly approaching him until they were right at his elbow, holding a phone in one hand and looking at him with curiosity. Naturally, he jumped a mile, but for

once managed not to throw anything or knock down the stack of apples he was standing next to.

“Sorry! I, uh, didn’t mean to startle you!” The teen, a blue jay in a gray hoodie, said, reaching out as though to steady him, but pulling back before they could make contact. Donald waved them off with a huff.

“No harm done,” he said when he had caught his breath. The teen watched him for another moment, clutching their phone.

“Er, what can I do for you?” Donald asked after another moment, and the kid visibly jumped, before grinning awkwardly.

“Um, yes! Yeah, just- is this you? In this video?” They held up their phone, which was dark. The jay glanced at it, blushed, and unlocked their phone, showing a video post.

Donald glanced at it, and was surprised to see the video Louie posted nearly a week ago. He had all but forgotten about it. He’d assumed most people had done the same thing.

Granted, he hadn’t checked the app in days, but some viral video couldn’t be that interesting, could it? Even if a few famous people had commented on it.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Donald wondered if the kids had noticed Bugs and Daffy retwittering it.

“Yeah, that’s me,” he answered, and the kid lit up, hood getting tossed back by their flaring crest feathers.

“That’s so cool! I’ve been trying to find this song for days! Is that your band? I tried asking online, but I think it got lost, there are a lot of comments now…” They started enthusiastically, then petered off, rubbing the back of their head. Donald blinked, then grinned widely.

“Yes, it was! The Three Caballeros, but we’ve been retired for a while. Panchito set up a website with our old recordings though. Hold on, let me just-” Donald pulled out his phone, then rattled off the link. Panchito had put it up a few years ago, to help with his entertainment business, but he had recently added their old song recordings. Donald hadn’t thought about it in a while, but the kid lit up when they looked down.

“Awesome, thank you so much! You should post that link, I bet other people would want to know,” the kid said cheerfully, swiping through their phone rapidly. Donald chuckled.

“Can’t imagine that many people would be interested, we haven’t been a band in years,” he pointed out with a small laugh, pulling up his grocery list.

“Couldn’t hurt!” The kid said enthusiastically, then tilted their head, going shy again. “Could we take a selfie? I mean, if that’s okay?” Donald stared for a moment, then shrugged. What was the harm? Let the kid have some fun, he supposed.

“Sure, why not?” He finally replied, and the kid wasted no time in getting up next to him and taking a few shots. Donald blinked stars out of his eyes, certain that none of them would turn out well, but the kid looked pleased enough.

“Sweet! I’m gonna frame that, proof I met you!” They cheered, and Donald internally laughed. He remembered being this obsessed with

some musicians when he was their age, and Dewey was shaping up to be similar, but it was something, being on the other side of a teen's first big *Thing*.

"If we run into each other later, I can even sign it," he offered, half joking, but the jay's eyes went wide, feathers flaring out even further.

"For sure! Oh, my name is Arty, by the way," they said belatedly, holding out a hand. Donald shook it.

"Donald Duck. Nice to meet you, Arty."

The jay grinned again, then darted towards an older woman at the end of the aisle, who gave Donald a grateful look over the teen's head before smiling and nodding down at Arty's excited chatter. Donald nodded back, though she was no longer looking at him, then went back to his shopping with a whistle.

It was only after delivering the groceries to Dewey, who had clearly roped his brothers in judging by their excited/exasperated looks, that he remembered to add the link to the original post. Looking at it now, he was fairly certain the number of views had at least tripled, but he couldn't remember how many there had been originally.

With nothing else to do except keep a vague ear out for kitchen alarms or screaming, he scrolled through the mess of comments on Tweeter. It was more of the same, but there were a lot more asking about the band, and fewer about Mickey, than he had expected. So it seemed his fan at the grocery store had been closer to the truth than he had been.

He answered some questions as he went, scrolling through hundreds of comments on the thing. It was just a video of him dancing with his kids, he had honestly never expected anyone to care.

Nature of the internet, he supposed. What was popular and what wasn't was unpredictable and chaotic at best. Maybe Panchito's website would get some extra traffic out of it.

But that did remind him to shoot a message to Bentina, asking if Webby had anything scheduled that would interfere with the promised dance lessons. He had let those wait long enough, and his schedule wasn't going to get lighter, not with the Cabs moving back north soon.

He found himself grinning stupidly at his dark phone screen, thinking about being able to just drive to see them. To just go, and spend an afternoon or a night, get dinner and be able to talk freely. He loved his kids, but having their first meeting in years be with witnesses had been… difficult. There were a lot of things he had wanted to say that he couldn't choke through while Scrooge and Huey were within earshot.

He sent José and Panchito a group text, just to let them know he was excited to see them, and could he help them in any way? Panchito hadn't given an exact timeline, but José had mentioned that Xandra was helping them move things using her zoom points, so they would only need to fly themselves up instead of all of their things.

Donald considered, then sent a second message offering to help unpack/clean up the cabana so it was ready, since Ari's cleaning habits could be… peculiar.

No immediate responses, but Donald was used to that; José's work schedule was inconsistent at best, and Panchito… was Panchito. He

worked on some translation work for New Quackmore in the meantime, making a mental note to plan something when they got closer to the move date; nothing crazy, but maybe they could go out? Or would they be too tired from flying? Maybe he should just get a house warming gift.

It felt supremely strange to be considering a house warming gift for the pair of them, but that was what you did, right? But of course that raised the question of what they would even want; Panchito hadn't really cared about decor, since it so often got broken and took up valuable space that could hold useful things like food or musical instruments. José liked to have art hanging or displayed, but his tastes could have changed in the last few years.

Was he overthinking this?

"Uncle Donald! Can you help with this part? It needs to be deep fried!" Huey called from the other room, a welcome distraction as his thoughts spiraled.

The whatever-it-was they were making was apparently a tortilla filled with BBQ chicken, which was apparently to be deep fried and then made… into a pizza?

"You're going to eat this," he said, not really a question, and Dewey nodded eagerly, while Huey looked fascinated in a purely intellectual way and Louie had a deeply disturbed expression. Webby was nowhere to be found, which was odd.

While the strange slices of food fried, Donald stayed quiet, letting the boys chatter wash over him. Talking about how the Woodchucks latest camping trip had gone, how Dewey had gotten more views on his latest video, and *this* one was sure to go viral, how Louie had found a show about making chairs that was clearly ripping off of Ottoman

Empire, but he kinda loved it anyway.

“Hey Uncle Donald? Do you like your new job?” Huey asked in a gap in the conversation. Donald glanced up at him, smiled.

“Yeah, it’s nice. I like the people, and having normal office hours most of the time,” he answered, thinking about his current class. They were getting more creative at their initial assignment; at least half of them were able to get past him any given day, and thus far nobody had caused any physical damage or hurt themselves.

Some were still wondering why he insisted on giving them the same task for every class, based on the emails and occasional complaints he overheard. He didn’t know where, exactly, they had been recruited from, but clearly none of them knew what drills were. Ah well, they would get it eventually.

“Most of the time?” Louie asked, glancing up from the dipping sauce he had been persuaded to mix. Donald nodded absently.

“They did ask if I could occasionally travel. Shouldn’t be very often, but it may come up,” he explained vaguely. “Training in other locations, when needed.”

“How’s that going, though? Everyone… um, I mean, they can understand you, right?” Huey asked, frowning. Donald paused. He always wore a voice changer when working at SHUSH (and as Paperinik). It was both to make sure people could understand him and to distance himself from being Donald Duck. It was an effective disguise. Which meant that it was easier if nobody knew he sounded different in other roles.

“Everyone has been able to so far,” he finally answered with a shrug.

The boys all looked at each other with mild confusion, before they clearly dismissed it and went back to their tasks.

Donald heard his phone go off in the other room, and after checking that the boys could handle their abomination in the oven, he went to check who it was.

José had responded to his question.

José: I am very excited to see you! Very soon, I promise, we will all be together!

José: I do not know if Panchito and I will arrive at the same time, but I at least would appreciate a ride from the airport, if that would not be too much trouble

Donald: Of course! Just let me know when you're flying in!

Panchito: if you can get a connection flight in Mexico, we can fly to Duckburg together!

Panchito: also, did you two notice we have had a number of visits to our band website?

Donald blinked at the new message, then took a peek at the Tweeter app. He'd posted the website link a few hours ago now, apparently he had been in the kitchen for a while. Curious, he opened the notifications again, and. Well.

Donald: i posted the link to that video Louie made… apparently a lot of people were excited about that.

Donald: dare I say it, but our band is becoming… popular

Panchito: aha! It was you!

Panchito: how exciting to have new fans!

José: it is a pity our recordings are so old! Perhaps we should re-record them when we are all in one place again!

Donald heard Dewey enthusiastically saying the food was cool enough to eat; it sounded like he was filming his reaction. He listened with half an ear while he checked back on Tweeter, skimming through the new batch of notifications. More of the same, but the volume was increasing rapidly.

He may need to increase how long it would take this trend to die back down.

He debated posting something about it, but honestly, he had no idea what he would even say, so he left it be. Instead he packed up his computer and phone to head to the houseboat for the night.

From the kitchen, Dewey was happily eating his creation, while Louie filmed. Huey was looking at his notebook, his single slice sitting untouched on a plate.

“Unca Donald! Come try this!” Dewey called before Donald could slip past the doorway. Donald debated moving on, but… he had to know.

Louie pointed the camera at him as he walked in, so he gave it a brief wave, then looked down. The final product was a thick slice of deep fried, cheese and sauce covered something, with a sour cream dipping sauce. Dubiously, he took a slice, then glanced at the boys.

Dewey nodded rapidly, grinning widely. Louie gave him a thumbs up behind the camera, a slight smirk on his face. Huey looked nervous, which clued him in that it was probably bad. Not that that was a huge shock, under the circumstances, but it was nice to be forewarned.

So, without letting himself think about it, he took a piece, dipped it in the sauce, and took a bite.

It was greasy. It was sweet, and savory, and tangy, and the chicken was somehow dry and too moist at once. The BBQ sauce was too strong, and the combination of it and the garlic in the dipping sauce was not agreeable. Overall it was too much flavor, and yet somehow everything overpowered each other, leaving him with a pile of bland flavors and textures.

He swallowed, glancing at the boys out of the corner of his eye. They were all watching him closely, clearly waiting for a reaction.

So he took another bite.

“Not bad, what is it?” he asked, and hid a grin at the disturbed expression on Louie’s face. Dewey flailed, stuttering denials.

Donald took another bite, skipping the dipping sauce. Without it, the thing was almost bearable, although the sweet BBQ sauce was still unpleasant with the marinara sauce on top. He could almost see it working with some adjustment, but with all the time the boys had taken it was hardly worth the effort.

"Uh, Unca Donald… you liked it? That's.. That's great!" Dewey finally managed, trying to recover. Louie nodded, elbowing Huey.

"Yeah! Yeah, we worked hard on it, so happy you're enjoying it!" Louie said, when Huey continued to stare. Donald swallowed the bite, nodding thoughtfully. Huey's eyes narrowed.

Donald gave another wave to their camera.

"Well, I've got some cleaning to do. You boys have fun now!" He called out, and walked out of the kitchen, taking the slice with him. Sure, it was only technically edible, but it was food, and he'd certainly eaten worse.

"So, that was our uncle, of very recent Three Caballeros fame! And uh… I don't think he is mortal," Dewey said, sounding both impressed and disturbed, before Donald stepped into the foyer and he could no longer hear.

At which point he let himself cackle.

Donald threw some laundry in the wash, then realized the houseboat was clean. He wasn't here too often, so clutter hadn't collected, and somehow he was keeping up with things better despite being more busy. So now, oddly, he had more free time.

With no more chores to do until the laundry was clean, he found himself wandering back to the Manor, feet moving without him thinking about it, until he arrived at the music room.

The door opened without issue, Bentina kept it oiled at least, but the inside of the room was dark, and musty.

He had no earthly idea why Scrooge had this room. He didn't play any instruments himself, besides the bagpipes, and didn't enjoy listening to most music. Or at least, he'd never liked listening to Donald play.

Despite that, the music room existed. It was soundproofed, held folders of Donald's sheet music, and all of his old instruments. Duckworth said the room had been built with the Manor, when Scrooge was convinced he needed to keep up appearances as a rich businessman. It had never been used before he and Della moved in, but a well maintained piano was kept inside. Donald had filled the rest of the room over time while living here, and when he had moved, he'd only taken his guitar.

It was his fifth one, Scrooge had a habit of throwing them away or destroying them whenever Donald was being annoying. This last one was a gift from José and Panchito though, and he had made sure it never was near Scrooge.

Panchito's guitar on the plane had been… Donald and José had replaced it, and luckily he hadn't been overly attached to that one in particular, but.

But.

It wasn't like he didn't notice that Scrooge tended to break his things, or dismissed his concerns, or threw him to the wolves to beat an enemy. It just… didn't always sink in, exactly, until he saw the guitar leave Panchito's hands.

The room was still, but not dusty; clearly someone was keeping everything clean. Donald's fingers trailed along ivory keys, phantom notes playing in his mind. Then from his hands as he slid onto the bench, eyes falling half mast as he settled into place.

Music had always been his escape; as the room filled with noise Donald's mind went quiet, only letting the flow of music drive out everything else.

Somewhere behind him, the door opened a crack, then wider. Donald didn't turn to look, letting himself ignore it, just for once. If there was anyone there, they weren't speaking. He just wanted this moment.

One song flowed into another, and another, his hands making the choices for him, and he soon forgot about the door entirely.

By the time he stopped the doorway was empty.

Bugs: are you trying to do this? Do you know what you've done?

Bugs: I am going to Kill You

Donald stared at his phone. The text didn't change. He pinched

himself, but he was apparently awake.

Donald: … no.

In a separate chat, he messaged Daffy. Usually he had to text Bugs about Daffy being, well, daffy, but for once Bugs was the looney one.

Donald: any reason your husband wants me dead?

Daffy: youre going to have to narrow this down for me

Donald: he just sent me a death threat. Maybe an hour ago. Does that help?

Daffy: not really, im in nyc filming this week

So. That was useless.

Bugs was typing.

He was still typing.

Donald sighed and went back to his laundry, waiting. It was probably nothing, if Daffy didn't know. But he couldn't deny getting strangely aggressive messages out of the blue was concerning.

Laundry was folded and put away. Bugs was still typing.

Donald checked his other messages. Bentina had confirmed that she could add dance lessons to Webby's schedule, and offered to clean the ballroom for them. Mickey saying how much he was looking forward to seeing him and the kids, just as soon as he wrapped up a new project, which he couldn't talk about but was nearly done.

Finally, a reply came in.

Bugs: that abomination of a recipe YOUR kids made, and YOU ate

Bugs: Wakko saw the video

Bugs: so the kids decided to make it

Bugs: that thing should be a war crime

Bugs: and to top it off!

Bugs: they expected me to eat it! And I did!

Bugs: if i get sick I'm suing you

Donald: …

Donald: RIP

The Return of 22

Next morning's SHUSH class began with a bang.

Literally; someone tossed a smoke bomb into the room seconds before the class was supposed to start, and by the time the smoke had cleared everyone was in their seats, casually, no sign of who had been the culprit vs. who had taken advantage of the chaos. Donald grinned.

"Good teamwork everyone," he said, and most of the class perked up. He'd noticed, early on, that they all seemed to be expecting him to reprimand them for doing, well, almost anything. For using their surroundings, bringing in tools or supplies he didn't expressly approve, even working together. He had no idea who was to blame for it, but finally, it seemed they were getting the message he was trying to teach.

"That actually brings me to our next assignment; you'll have a week for this one," he began, setting his shoulder bag down on his chair and walking to the front of the conference room. "Your assignment is to steal something from the Weapons lockdown and bring it to class. Don't get caught, don't break anything. Any questions?"

Shifting and murmuring, lots of blank faces and wide eyes. He waited. One tentative hand raised.

"What are we stealing?" 720 asked, quietly but clearly. Donald gave her an innocent look, letting his shoulders rise in a small shrug.

"Oh, anything. So long as you can prove where it came from," Donald said easily, and was pleased to see a few people lean forward with mild interest now.

“Could we have a contest? For most impressive thing stolen,” Trainee RL0 asked, his tail swishing behind him. Donald glanced around the room, then nodded.

“Sure. I’ll even bring a prize for the winner,” he tossed out, then glanced down at his notes. Before he could begin, however, someone else spoke up.

“There’s some guy that looks a lot like you trending on Tweeter, did you know?” Donald froze, for a breath, then continued ruffling through his notes.

“Oh? Hope they weren’t doing anything embarrassing,” he replied casually, only glancing up when they remained silent. A few shook their heads.

“Alright then. Now, let’s talk about code breaking…”

“You’re having your trainees break into our secure weapons storage,” Ravenson said, more than asked, when he explained the plan. Donald nodded, leaning forward in his chair and ignoring the other trainers around him.

“We need more practical ways of testing their skills before they’re in the field, and this is one of the few ways to do so. This base’s defenses are to SHUSH standards, which means if they succeed they’re equipped to handle most places they’ll be going on early missions,” he explained.

“Besides,” he added, before anyone else could speak, “this can double as a security test for the base. Any methods that worked can be reviewed to confirm we don’t have any security holes to patch.” Agent RN made a mildly concerned humming noise.

“Surely you don’t expect them to manage to get through? Especially since Agent WS is now aware of the plan?” She asked, Donald shook his head.

“No, I don’t expect them all to be successful immediately. The point is to evaluate how they’re approaching things *now,* not during a live mission,” he explained, and was mildly concerned. Was it really that confusing?

“Why not somewhere outside the facility? A nearby office building, maybe?” An agent Donald didn’t recognize asked.

“That’s another option down the line, but this gives me full access to where they’re infiltrating. Plus, since the staff is aware that they’re doing this with permission, we don’t have to worry about our trainees getting arrested.”

RN frowned, pursing her lips.

“Our base is more secure than a civilian location, isn’t that a step down from this lesson?”

Donald inwardly sighed.

“They’re familiar with this location, which means they’ll have an easier time getting through. Weapons is the only area that they will, technically, be infiltrating, since they have permission to be in the rest of the base. Besides, again, we won’t be arresting anyone that gets caught.” He said carefully, biting back the retort of ‘ *your trainees aren’t nearly ready to be in the field, even for a lesson.’*

Ravenson nodded once, decisively.

“Your plan is approved, Agent Double Duck. Please keep us updated on anything security related. Next on the agenda, recruitment. Agent RN?”

And so the department meeting went on. It was amazing how so much of spy work was the same as any office job.

“Double Duck, one last question. When do you feel your trainees will be ready for field work?” Ravenson asked. Donald paused, tapping his fingers thoughtfully against the table.

“Partnered with a senior agent, most of them could handle a basic infiltration mission within a month or two. I can get you more specific timelines for each of them once this evaluation is done,” he finally replied.

“As for solo work, I want to spend more time with them to make that call. They’re still lacking in a lot of the more practical aspects of field work, which could be resolved by going live, but I want to be sure first,” Donald explained. An older agent in the back nodded; that was the Weapons trainer, Agent WS, who had trained Donald the first time. Donald was somewhat surprised the bulldog wasn’t higher ranked, but he seemed content with his position.

“I see,” Ravenson said, and that was *all* she said, letting the meeting wrap up and dismissing everyone with a wave of her hand. Donald stood to go, cracking his back loudly as he stood.

“Double Duck, would you stay a moment longer?” Ravenson called before he could reach the door. Donald sat back down, curious and not a bit paranoid.

Ravenson waited until the room cleared and, (Donald was certain), until the lingering agents had lost their excuses and wandered off. You didn’t become an agent without being a bit nosy, after all. Then she looked at him with a mild expression.

“I wanted to follow up with you about the incident with Steelbeak and the Eggheads. I’m sure you know they were long gone by the time we arrived?” Donald nodded; if they hadn’t been able to find a way out, he would have been utterly shocked.

“Can you tell me what McDuck was after at that temple?” She asked; Donald pursed his beak, feeling like there was something else she had meant to ask, but answered regardless.

“A scroll that can answer any question, or predict the future, there were a lot of different tales. We found it’s not that useful, it can only answer personal questions about the asker, but I doubt that FOWL was aware of the limitation,” he explained. In truth he had all but forgotten the scroll already, Scrooge had stored it away in the Second Bin below the house and as far as Donald knew nobody had looked at it since. Frankly he was surprised that Scrooge hadn’t just tossed it in a drawer somewhere.

Ravenson nodded slowly, thoughtfully.

“I could see that attracting some attention. Still, quite a coincidence that they showed up the same day McDuck was going. Do you think they were after the scroll, or the family?”

And that, Donald didn’t know. It hadn’t even occurred to him to ask.

“Steelbeak mentioned having orders to get the scroll specifically,” he said slowly, focusing on the details. “I don’t know if their intent was to show up after we had gone into the temple or if it was just the timing; they could have just been counting on McDuck doing the work and navigating the traps for them.”

“That could mean they have an ear on McDuck. Who would have known about where you were going?” Ravenson asked, frowning.

“Going on some adventure? Anyone at the Money Bin, since that’s the only reason McDuck wouldn’t be working. Going to that temple specifically? Everyone on the plane, Bentina, maybe the kids' friends, but I doubt they would have had a map,” Donald went through the options rapidly, foot tapping.

“A tracker on the plane?”

“The plane gets blown up or destroyed frequently, they would have to replace any trackers constantly. On a person, maybe, but that seems excessive if McDuck wasn't the target, and as far as I know nobody has been followed since,” Donald paused, considering. “Could be they just followed the plane itself.” Ravenson didn’t look convinced.

“Any chance they already knew the scroll’s location?” She asked, but Donald shook his head.

“There were no traps or riddles on this one. If they already knew where it was, why wait?”

Ravenson was clearly still unhappy, but nodded anyway.

“We’ll look into it. Now, there is something else,” and here she looked… awkward, perhaps? Uncomfortable.

“Agent 22 has reached out, and offered her services in dealing with FOWL. She’s aware that they are resurfacing and is willing to come out of retirement to ensure they aren’t a threat,” Ravenson said carefully, and Donald bit back a groan.

Agent 22, aka Bentina Beakley. As in, the woman he lived with (sort of, at least), who would probably not buy the voice-changer disguise method.

“When does she come back?” Donald asked, and Ravenson paused, freezing slightly before relaxing again. As much as she normally did, anyway.

“I wanted to speak to you first, before accepting her offer,” she said, slowly. Donald went blank with surprise, staring at her openly.

“It is an unusual situation,” she continued, while Donald continued to stare, “having two agents that know each other in their civilian lives. And in this case, you would both likely be working together if she does come back on. Frankly, I was surprised to realize you hadn’t before you both retired.”

“It was one of the conditions of me coming on, nobody knowing,”

Donald said faintly, distracted, “so we were never assigned together. She was still primarily based in Europe back then anyway.”

“I see.” A pause, then: “Your identity will almost certainly be compromised, if she comes back online.” No further commentary, not even a recommendation, just the facts.

And the fact was, Donald had no idea what to do. He’d never really considered letting any of the family know about his previous jobs. Sure, he’d come close to them being revealed accidentally before, but intentionally doing it was never in the cards.

Some part of him longed to do it, though. Daydreamed about revealing that he was a hero, and had saved the world, that he wasn’t just unlucky Donald Duck.

The rest of him beat down that desire whenever it came up. It was ridiculous, he wasn’t doing any of this to impress people. Making sure everyone he loved was safe was far more important than them knowing about it, and anyone who knew his identity was in a great deal more danger.

Well. Everyone except one person, who was in about as much danger from spy work as one could be.

“I think,” Donald started, then coughed, began again, “I think that, under the circumstances, it would be better to have her back.”

Ravenson didn’t immediately respond, taking her time to scan over his face, but in her favor, she didn’t question his decision, merely nodded, and looked down to make a quick note. Donald wanted to leave, if he was being honest, go and have a quiet crisis over the impending identity reveal, but reconsidered.

“Who would I speak to about getting access to a federal prisoner?”

Ravenson seemed more than willing to give him leeway on his work, not even asking *why* he was asking about the Blot (maybe she had put together he was helping Darkwing?), sending a message to Agent Redwing, who was handling the situation.

Her email summary had an air of irritation, explaining that the Blot had been moved to another prison a few years back, but they were having issues finding the records and were giving Redwing the run-around. She seemed less concerned about this than Donald was, assuring him it was common because most prisons used paper records instead of anything digital, so frequently older records were misfiled.

Donald himself thought it was a huge issue; he liked to know where the incredibly dangerous criminal he had put him away was, but Redwing insisted that it was normal, just frustrating, and that she was certain she would have more information soon.

He could see why Darkwing thought he was being brushed off, at least. He wasn’t sure if Redwing was actually that busy or if she just came across that way in email, but if he was frustrated from one conversation? Darkwing was not a very patient man, in his experiences so far.

Still, he emailed Redwing back to ask if they could get some permission to go to the prison itself, either to speak to someone in person and see if they could remember anything that the warden didn’t, or to just look at the records themselves.

Before he got a response, it was time to go home.

Home, to where Bentina was, leaving him with the choice of saying something now, or waiting.

It would be wiser to have the conversation privately, so he could explain without interruption. The Manor wasn't the best place for that, but probably better there than at SHUSH, right?

Right, yes, and it was the adult thing to do.

On the other hand… Donald was used to be dismissed, ignored. Used to people assuming he was less competent than he was, either because of his temper, or his bad luck. If he told her he was a spy, would she even believe him? Maybe he would let her speak to Ravenson, or set up a meeting while at SHUSH and discuss things there. It would probably carry more weight if he had some proof of his claim.

His phone chimed as he drove, three times in rapid succession, so he was even more tense when he parked, scrambling to grab his phone and only just remembering to remove his voice changer before leaving his car.

Mickey: KH emergency

Mickey: ETA 10 minutes

Mickey: see you soon fellas!

Donald checked the time, then cursed the air blue. He had five minutes.

The only thing he had going for him was that the house was empty.

One email to Ravenson warning her he might be busy the next few days, and he was off at a dead run to a safe space for the portal to open. Multi-verse emergencies waited for no-one.

Interlude: Bentina and the Pantry Door

Bentina was getting used to having the house to herself, lately. It used to be, even if Scrooge was gone for business, she and Webby would use the empty house to practice, running and chasing each other around the massive building. But Webby joined the boys on almost every adventure, and went to see her friends often, so Bentina could no longer count on her granddaughter's company.

Donald was usually around, but this time she hadn't seen him at all; he should be home, but with the kids all gone on an adventure he may have decided to… hm. It occurred to her that she had no idea what Donald got up to in his free time. Sure, he could be found napping or relaxing around the Manor at times, and she knew he enjoyed music, but beyond that, she didn't know him very well at all.

Della liked to joke that there wasn't much to know, that Donald was a simple guy that liked simple things. Which certainly seemed true at times, but others… the steel she had seen in his eyes during the Shadow War had certainly implied there was more beneath the surface.

Then again, she thought with a muted sigh, hearing frustrated yelling from behind the pantry door, maybe not.

Bentina went about her routine, leaving Donald in the kitchen. Cleaning, polishing, organizing the family rooms and living rooms, leaving the library and study the mess of cluttered research they were. That was the way Scrooge liked things; a mess during the research and preparation, then all neatly packed away once they returned, along with whatever treasure or trinket they'd set out to find.

She was hoping to make some headway on these tasks, as much as she could before going back to SHUSH. While she didn't intend to go on

missions, she would still be going to their local office and therefore have less time around the house.

It had been a difficult decision, reaching out. She had been retired for over 10 years, ever since Webby joined the family. The first time she had seen those tiny eyes looking back up at her, so full of trust… Webby had taken priority, and missions were too dangerous. Even a hint that Agent 22 was raising a child could be so very deadly to that tiny little girl; it hadn't been a hard decision.

But now, Webby could defend herself, had people she could count on, *Bentina* had people she could trust to watch over her granddaughter, and FOWL was making moves. She had hardly believed Scrooge when he mentioned it, had wondered if Donald had just imagined it or been mistaken. Surely she would have heard about it, retired or not?

Yet, when she called the new Director, Ravenson, she was told that they had confirmed that FOWL seemed to be operating again, and that one of their current agents had already had a brief confirmed sighting of Steelbeak. That, plus her own run-in with Black Heron, confirmed that they had two dangerous agents back in the field and apparently seeking out their own artifacts for some new scheme. FOWL's long term goals had never been fully clear, beyond larceny.

Bentina had more to risk now, more people she cared for, more weak points to defend. But that made it all the clearer of a decision: Agent 22 was coming out of retirement.

Ravenson had been unenthusiastic, at the start; Bentina would guess, if pressed, that the idea of an agent her age wasn't a hugely exciting prospect. But her knowledge had won out, and Ravenson had asked her to come in the next week to lay out what she would be able to help with. She wasn't the only agent coming back in, apparently Agent DD, or Double Duck, had also agreed to come out of retirement. She'd never met him, but his reputation was solid, and Ravenson had spoken well of him when it had come up. Bentina would confess, at least to

herself, that the idea of getting back into the field was a somewhat exciting one, in the same way that a proper fight had been after so many years of simple spars. A chance to stretch long-neglected muscles.

She would need to talk to Webby, at some point. There were too many secrets between them, secrets she would one day have to own up to. But this, Webby should know. Perhaps Scrooge, though he seemed far less concerned about FOWL than she had expected. They hadn't been active since the twins had been children themselves, so she supposed he had let himself forget how dangerous they had been.

Lost in her own head, she didn't realize until her stomach grumbled that it was late, and she had yet to make supper.

Of course, there was nothing in the kitchen to easily eat as leftovers. She eyed the pantry door, debating going out instead. But no, it was late, and she would rather just make herself something and retire with a cup of tea.

From behind the door, Donald let out another loud squawk, and there was a clattering sound.

Well, hopefully there was something to salvage afterwards.

"Donald, please back away from the door," she called out, hoping to keep him from barreling into her when the door opened. He yelled again, either unable to hear her or too angry to do so.

With a sigh, she grabbed the door handle, and pulled the door open swiftly, stepping to the side.

Nothing happened.

Frowning, Bentina stepped around the door to peer into the small room, hitting the lightswitch as she stepped to the doorframe.

The pantry was empty.

She took a step, glancing around as though Donald would appear from behind a non-existent corner or below a shelf. Nobody was there. Nothing was even out of place, but she was certain she had heard things clattering and breaking.

The empty room gave her no answers. Bentina took another step inside, glancing at the shelves for supper inspiration while trying to decide if Donald could have been in another room. Maybe there was an echo?

As she stepped inside, her sleeve caught on the door handle and it swung closed behind her. The room was instantly cast into shadow, only lit by one overhead bulb that threw yellow light and dark shadows around the small space. Bentina didn't think she had ever been inside with the door closed, it was surprisingly dark.

Regardless, she knew the contents of the pantry well enough to navigate, so she paid it no mind while finding something to eat. Scrooge loved to buy in bulk and keep large volumes of shelf stables, so there were cans and cans of everything from vegetables to haggis on the upper shelf. She was confident that nobody would ever eat the latter, but it remained on the shelf regardless, a testament of Scrooge refusing to throw away anything that potentially had a use.

One arm loaded with dried pasta and some ingredients for sauce, Bentina turned back to the door, mind still wondering where Donald

could have been to sound trapped in the pantry. She twisted the knob, pushing with one shoulder so she could hit the light switch as she passed.

Her shoulder caught. She frowned, focused on the door. Twish, push.

The door remained shut.

Bentina set her things down, shoving her entire body against the door, and twisting the handle again. It creaked alarmingly, but nothing. It felt like she was trying to shove the door through a wall, not the thin door jamb and open space of the kitchen.

Now, she *could* , in theory, kick the door down. She was Agent 22, and she had broken through far more sturdy surfaces than a wooden door.

But this door was solid oak, and would be difficult to replace in a hurry. Certainly not before someone else saw it had been damaged, and, well. She wasn't *Donald,* who destroyed doors and windows so often it was background noise, she didn't want anyone to see her lapse in…

What, control? It had been an accident that the door got caught, she hadn't done anything except not notice it closing on her.

The thought caught at her, as she pressed on the door again, trying to find an angle that would allow it to open. Yes, it was an accident. Just a brief uncontrollable moment in time, with unforeseen consequences. Only, it had to be the same for Donald, didn't it? Just a moment of bad luck, a single movement in the wrong direction, and things just happened. A book thrown through a window. A cup dropped, or knocked off a table.

A stubborn door closed and caught in the frame, unable to be opened.

The thought wrapped around her mind, pointing out that she was a spy, trained and experienced, and yet she was stuck in the pantry. If it wasn't her fault, then by extension it couldn't be his, either. Just an accident, the duck's bad luck striking in yet another way.

Well. When she did get out of here, she would owe him an apology. And they would be finding a way to fix this door. It could be dangerous, what if someone got stuck in here when the house was empty?

Though, it wasn't, not today. Donald wasn't in the room, but she knew she had heard him somewhere nearby. If she called him, he may be able to get the door open from the outside, and perhaps she could make that apology over dinner. She had noticed that while he could cook, and surprisingly well at that, he rarely bothered with anything other than sandwiches or ready-made meals if he wasn't cooking for the children.

Decided, Bentina pulled out her phone, immediately dialing Donald's number before her pride could stop her. It took a long moment to ring, which was a concern (what if she had no bars in this room?), but finally connected.

Behind her, a faint buzzing sound echoed oddly amongst the cans. She frowned, turning to look, and there, sitting innocently on a shelf, was a phone, its' screen casting sharp shadows against the ceiling. On the screen, a photo of all four children, Webby beaming from the middle of the boys, still surprised to be included. She had started calling Donald Uncle, lately, and always looked surprised and ecstatic when Donald responded.

She had yet to call Scrooge Uncle again, after that disastrous reveal of the Spear of Selene.

Bentina stepped forward, watching as the call buzzed on, her own name and number on the screen. She thought of herself as intelligent, but right now she didn't understand. Donald was never far away from his phone. It was one of the few things he never seemed to lose, or misplace, or throw. He always responded, was always ready to drop whatever he was doing if someone needed help, so what was his phone doing *here?*

There were no windows in the pantry, no vents large enough for even Webby to travel through. No way for anyone to have left this room except through the door.

So where was he?

Bentina wasn't precisely sure how long she was in the pantry, trying to force the door open. It didn't feel like terribly long, perhaps ten minutes, except for how it also felt like hours. Funny how a stressful situation made time so strange. Sure, she could check her phone, but doing so felt like giving in to her anxiety, acknowledging that she was trapped unless she wanted to do serious damage to the door, and nobody was due to be home for days.

She could try getting Duckworth's attention; it was never clear if he was in the building or not, moving between the Manor and the afterlife as he pleased. It was nice to have help cleaning, passive-aggressive though it was, but his presence was unpredictable. And truthfully, she might just prefer to die in this pantry than call Duckworth for help.

Her best bet was for Donald to return, from wherever he was, and that

when he did he would be looking for his phone. Which brought her back to wondering where, exactly, he was. His phone had gone off a few times since she had found it, confirming that it was still there, and functional.

She was pressing on the door again, hoping that this time, she would find an angle that would let it open, when there was an… odd sound behind her. Like a key opening a lock, but muffled. She spun around, wondering if there was a secret door in the back of the room that she hadn't seen, but there was nothing there.

Then, as she watched, a line of light crossed from the ceiling to the floor, like a door being opened, but in the middle of the room. It widened, and as it opened further she could see a silhouetted figure standing there. A few, in fact, but she couldn't make out the particulars, too blinded by the sudden light in the small space.

The doorway opened fully, and through it stepped a figure, bathed in golden light, waving a hand absently behind them as the opening closed again. As the light faded, and she could once again make out details, the figure took on a shape and was revealed to be-

"Donald?"

Donald looked up, eyes wide, glowing faintly blue as his sailor uniform came into sharp relief (and had it looked like that when he walked through? Something about the shape seemed off), one hand reached out for his phone.

"Aw phooey."

For a long moment, they stood there, staring at each other, before Donald sighed, shoving a hand through his hair.

“Can we have this conversation outside? Bit cramped in here,” he suggested, and his tone at least hinted at a joke, but it was tight, tense. Bentina nodded, and stepped aside to let him get to the door, utterly baffled.

It was only as he slipped past her that she remembered the issue that led her here in the first place.

“Er, Donald…” But before she could, sheepishly, explain that she had jammed the door, he had reached out, gave it a few taps, then yanked, hard, on the handle as he pressed on the wood.

And the door creaked open. As though it hadn’t kept her trapped in here for who-knew how long at this point. Donald stepped through slowly, rubbing his eyes. In the proper lighting of the kitchen she could see he looked worn, bags under his eyes and a stagger that screamed exhaustion.

She stepped out of the pantry, only just remembering to grab the food she had gathered before the door shut.

“Wait-” Donald started, as the door slipped through her fingers. As soon as it clicked shut, a garbled quack came from behind it. Bentina turned to stare, while Donald groaned, made his way over to the door, and opened it again. As soon as he hit the light, the sound stopped.

She stepped closer, watching closely, as Donald… reached behind the canned haggis, pulled out a tape recorder with a wire hanging from it, and hit the stop button. Still silent, he set it back behind the cans, turned off the light, and closed the door.

Bentina waited, while Donald made his way back to the kitchen table, for him to speak first. She had no idea what to say.

Facts first: Donald had not been trapped in the pantry, when all evidence had suggested he was. He had in fact known exactly how to get *out* when it was stuck, implying that if the issue ever did come up, he wouldn't remain stuck. He had a tape recorder set up to play sounds of him being trapped inside at the ready.

He had been somewhere else, somewhere that he either could not or would not bring his phone, and had set things up so that if anyone looked for him, they would assume he was stuck in the pantry.

It was like having a puzzle that was mostly put together, but she was somehow missing the pieces that would make the picture make sense.

Donald wasn't offering up anything useful, staring into empty space near her head, and she got the distinct impression he would fall asleep if she didn't intervene.

Right then. First, tea. Start supper, though at this point she was wishing that she had something faster on hand. She preferred properly prepared meals whenever possible, but at times like these it would be easier if she could just microwave something.

Regardless. Water boiling for pasta, sauce cooking on the stove. Kettle whistling, tea poured and placed in front of Donald, another made for herself. Fresh teabags from her own collection, she wouldn't hear a word about reusing them for days like Scrooge did. Donald perked up slightly when the mug was placed in front of him, hands wrapping around the base like a lifeline.

She had managed to plate two servings by the time he had taken more

than a sip of tea, but he looked aware at least. She met his eye as she sat down, foregoing the dining room for the ease of the kitchen.

"So, you pretend to get stuck in the pantry?" She asked, because that was the only part of this she had managed to put together. Donald took another gulp of tea, though surely it still had to be boiling, and nodded.

"Nobody questions it," he responded, and his voice was rougher than usual; she had to strain to understand him. "Clumsy old Donald, getting locked in the pantry. Easy alibi."

"Only if you're positive nobody will look inside," she observed. Donald gave her a deadpan look, which was fair, but it made her cringe.

"I'm afraid I have to apologize, for that. Clumsy or not, it is hardly fair to leave you in that situation," she said clearly, because she had been taught to give apologies correctly; Donald gave her a baffled look.

"It's not really an issue. It's been useful, even," he said, and wasn't that its own tragedy? That he was so confident not a single person in the house would let him out. And that until today, he had been correct.

She hadn't even gone in to help him.

Bentina took a bite of pasta, stewing over her words carefully.

"Regardless of its usefulness, it's…" she hesitated over her words. Cruel sprung to mind, but she didn't like to label the children as cruel.

But what else did that leave her? Selfish, to ignore Donald because he was clumsy? Because he had the bad luck to get into these situations?

… did he even get into these situations? She was abruptly afraid to ask, wondering if he had ever actually been trapped without help, and realized nobody would ever come for him.

“It’s wrong, to leave you apparently locked inside a room, when we have the ability to let you out,” she concluded, but she could tell, at a glance, that he was unconvinced.

“Where were you, anyway?” She asked instead, because that was half the mystery. Why did he go to such lengths to hide his whereabouts? Everything about the setup screamed that he had planned it in advance, but she couldn’t figure why.

“Uh… magical alternate dimension, more or less,” Donald replied slowly, feeling each word out as he talked. “Not one I want the kids going anywhere near, and, well, you know them.” He didn’t elaborate further. Bentina eyed his exhausted appearance; whatever was behind that portal had either been an incredible fight, or he had been gone longer than she had realized.

“Are you certain? Your family would help you in a heartbeat,” she pointed out. He snorted, but the sound wasn’t amused.

“I’m certain. Besides, not sure I could bring anyone through anyway; it’s a chosen one thing. Well, chosen four. Six?” He paused tapping his fingers on the table as if he was counting.

“A bunch, anyway. But the portal only opens for us, so even if I wanted to bring someone through I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t work. And… I’m serious, Bentina, this isn’t the same as their adventures. I

don’t want any of our family near it.”

He hesitated, tapping his fingers again. For a long moment he clearly debated saying more, opening his beak and taking a breath, only to stop and go silent.

She took pity on him.

“I won’t mention it to anyone. I know you have a good reason to believe this is too dangerous for the children. But, if I may…” She waited until he was looking at her, eyes rimmed with dark shadows.

“Please at least tell me you’re going,” she requested, earnestly, the idea of him simply disappearing and them never knowing why was almost too devastating to bear. Donald held her eye for a long moment, before he nodded.

“And no more of this stuck in the pantry nonsense. Scrooge left the boys entirely alone when I was kidnapped because he assumed you were still here,” she added, and Donald blinked at her.

“When did you get kidnapped?” Now it was her turn to blink at him, baffled at the realization that in all the chaos, they had never told Donald what had happened.

“I’ll tell you that story,” she offered, “if you tell me how you managed to escape Steelbeak last month. Scrooge was very vague about it.” Donald snorted, actually amused this time, and held out a hand.

“Deal.”

Aren't you Retired?

The plan was, Agent 22 was to come in Monday to meet with Ravenson to confirm her return and new responsibilities. Ravenson's plan was to set up a meeting with Donald afterwards, in his (little used) office, so they could have some privacy.

Donald regretted not just getting it over with when he had accidentally been caught returning from the Kingdom Hearts dimension, but in his defense, he had been there for weeks before returning, so had been slow to recall what was happening in his normal life.

Well, his own version of normal, anyway.

And by the time it had really occurred to him, it was late, Bentina was encouraging him to get some sleep, and he was just so tired. Most of his side-adventures didn't wipe him out like this, but the Kingdom Hearts events had a way of doing it. He'd called it a magical zombie plague once, half-drunk warping somewhere with Goofy, Sora sleeping in his bunk. Goofy had laughed, too loud and too long, and hadn't disagreed.

Not that he regretted seeing the others; Mickey and Goofy he could catch up with in their dimension, but the kids? Aerith, Leon? They lived there, had to deal with the clean up and the fall out, and no matter how many times the magic summoned them back, it never felt like things were finished when they left. It was exhausting, dangerous work that would just never end.

So no, he didn't manage to talk to her Friday night.

The rest of the family was still off on an adventure on Saturday, but

Penumbra came to the Manor that day, asking to spar since, according to her, nobody on Earth gave her a challenge. So Saturday was a bust. Penumbra wasn't great at keeping secrets, and likely would see no reason to do so in this case anyway.

Sunday started slow, late, and Donald had held hope that it would stay that way. For about an hour, it did.

Then, of course, of *course,* he heard an explosion from the city and some kind of beam shooting into the sky.

He shouldn't get involved, he told himself, hands clenched around the steering wheel of his car.

He was retired from hero work, and there were two already on the case, his mind screamed as he fixed his hat.

He really needed to start listening to that voice again, he groaned, as his fist caught the beak of some henchman for hire, surrounding a dog in a bright costume screaming that he would summon a god from the netherworld to destroy all of Duckburg.

"Wha- Paperinik?" Gizmoduck stuttered, almost getting hit by an energy beam and flipping midair to dodge. Donald grunted and didn't respond; he hadn't had time to check his voice changer before arriving, and had no idea if it was working right now.

The machine generating the portal was technology based, but the portal itself screamed in magic that felt wrong and dirty, like it had been taken and processed, not found or created like magic should be.

It felt like the Blot's old tech, repurposed for this bizarre plan, and it had Donald's blood running cold, even as he threw one henchman into another and moved closer.

Magic wasn't PK's realm, it was Donald's, and he wondered for a wild moment if he should have come without the cape, but right now all he could focus on was henchman and trying to read what the portal was doing, so regret would have to come later.

For now, he ducked closer to the machine, largely ignored by the madman running it, and tried to get a look. It was powered by some strangely glowing power cells, but he couldn't tell if they were the source of that sour, unpleasant magic. If they were, they were well sealed. The rest of the machine he couldn't make hide nor hair of.

A blast came from his left, and he threw himself into a roll to avoid it, grumbling under his breath.

Huh, voice changer was working, that was good. What wasn't good was that the villain, whatever their name was, had noticed him now, and was shooting some ray gun at him.

"Why a ray gun?" He asked himself, "Bullets are so much cheaper." Granted, he didn't want to be shot either, but still. The villain glared at him.

"You would never understand my work! All you heroes are the same, blind to the possibilities! Gizmoduck, and Darkwing, and-" and here he paused, squinting at Donald.

"Who even are you?" He asked irritably. Donald considered answering, even opened his mouth, but decided to throw a chunk of rubble at him instead, smacking the gun out of his hands.

Unlike a real gun, this one was delicate and complex, so it shattered on impact with the ground.

"Guns are also more durable," Donald noted casually, while the villain stared at the ground, then at his hands, like he wasn't quite sure what had happened.

"You just- you threw a *rock* at me," he mumbled, disbelieving, and turned to look back at Donald, mouth still gaping, face morphing into offense, "A rock! What even-"

Donald tackled him to the ground, reaching for cuffs and the dog's wrists as soon as they stopped tumbling, growling a warning that was barely audible. The dog froze anyway.

"See, I never did get why you all want to monologue. Every single villain I ever fight, you all want to explain how clever your plan is, and how brilliant you are, and what terrible torture you have set in store," Donald said conversationally as he dragged the dog upright and searched his pockets for anything dangerous.

"And then, you get so caught up in what you're saying that you forget to, you know, actually take out the hero trying to keep you from ending the world," he continued, finding nothing of value and standing up. Gizmoduck had taken the distraction as an opportunity, and was rapidly disassembling the machine. The portal bulged, grew, then started to shrink, the awful magic powering it thankfully fading away. Gizmo let out a long, shaky breath, leaning forward onto the console with his hands. His armor was dented and scratched, and his arms trembled.

"When did you last sleep?" Donald asked, before he could think about

it, and Gizmo's head lurched up to stare at him. Donald crossed his arms, waiting.

"Er… I- I am of course perfectly healthy!" Gizmo stuttered into a semi-confident tone, and Donald was getting a bit tired of the heroic drama voice, but he could hardly judge someone for a gimmick.

Still, he was about to tell him that falling asleep on the job wasn't the way to get things done when he felt a pressure change. Just a mild tick, like someone had thrown a blanket over him. His eyes slid to the machine power cells, which were still glowing an unpleasant grayish purple color. The glow had clearly gotten brighter in the last few minutes, and as he watched, it got stronger still.

Gizmoduck frowned, turned to look at what Donald was looking at, and Donald shouted a warning, throwing himself at the metal suit and tossing his shielded arm up. Just in time for the power cells to burst with a staticy pop and a wave of energy to shoot towards them in a rippling wave.

The magic felt like sludge running over his senses, but thankfully it was blocked by the energy shield attached to his arm. Gizmo, from below him, stared at the ripples of power in shock. His visor was lit up, and blaring warnings at them both; Donald forced himself up, into a better position to defend them both, and gritted his teeth as another ripple hit him directly.

Power cells, these were power cells completely filled with some strange magic that he couldn't make sense of. It felt unnatural, but magic was itself natural; even necromancy was somewhat natural. The only time he had ever felt something like this was… was…

Was when he had defeated the Blot, and destroyed his machine. The only records of the plans were in Ducklair Tower, and the machine

had been completely disintegrated by Donald himself to make sure that nobody could ever use it again. Which meant that the only way someone could have recreated the Blot's technology was to have gotten it from the man himself.

Donald grunted again, as another wave hit his shield, but it was weaker now. He glanced around; the henchman had used the distraction to flee, and the villain had been close enough to them that Donald had inadvertently protected him as well. The road and buildings all around them had… aged was the best word he could come up with. Everything looked like it had been left to rot for decades; plants were withered and dead, asphalt cracked and crumbling, metal rusted and pitted.

He didn't want to know what it would have done to a living person.

Finally the energy had fully dispersed, and Donald was able to drop the shield, wincing. Gizmo, behind him, let out a shrill sigh.

"What *was* that?" Gizmo asked, staring all around them. The machine was entirely gone, and the villain behind them was whimpering quietly to himself, completely nonsensical.

"If I didn't know better…" Donald began, before he shook his head. Gizmo frowned at him, turning to look him in the eye.

"What?" He demanded, hands on hips. His voice had lost some of the pompous airs, and underneath was steel. Donald glanced at the villain, then shook his head again.

"Not here. We need to get somewhere secure, and… we need to call in Darkwing."

So despite Donald's earlier hesitation, he found himself in the underwater labs of McDuck's Money Bin. Well, at least he knew that Scrooge wasn't going to walk in to see him. Gizmo was uploading the footage he'd been able to gather during the fight to try to get more of an idea about what the machine had been powered by and what caused the power cell meltdown.

Donald had said exactly what it had been, but he was well used to people not believing him when he said magic. Especially in this business; no matter that Gizmoduck clearly worked with Scrooge and should likely know that magic was real. Seeing versus believing, and people didn't expect magic to be powering a doomsday device.

Donald had called Darkwing himself using the main system; the man had clearly been surprised to see him calling, and more so when he said he needed to come ASAP about the Blot. Initially he'd seemed put out that Gizmoduck had become involved, but professionalism had taken over and he'd sworn he'd be there as fast as he could.

Ah, world ending plots. The true way of getting heroes to work together, apparently.

Donald thought about how his original plans for the day had been to clean the houseboat and plan Webby's first dance lesson on Monday, and wondered why he let his life get so strange.

"These readings make no *sense,* " Gizmo insisted, glaring at the monitor like it would change to something clearer if he continued staring. Donald raised a brow but didn't bother repeating himself; he did send an email to Agent Redwing, CC'ing Ravenson.

The attack on Duckburg this morning was using the Blot's old technology, or a very accurate imitation. The need to speak to him and confirm who he's been in contact with is a high priority, as this is now an active threat. The recent culprit, a Dr. Ghast, is currently in custody at Duckburg PD Headquarters, pending removal to a higher security facility. He would not speak to how he acquired or created his portal technology in Gizmoduck's initial interrogation.

-Agent Double Duck

Was it possibly showing his hand to being Paperinik? Possibly, but some things were more important. If it came down to it, he could feasibly claim to be involved as Donald, PK's friend and contact; Ravenson at least may buy it. Redwing didn't actually live in Duckburg, her base was on the east coast, so hopefully she wouldn't ask questions.

Unfortunately, it being an emergency didn't mean it wasn't still a Sunday.

"Paperinik?" Gizmoduck was looking at him again, while the footage ran on a loop behind him. Onscreen, Donald could see his own smug grin when the villain's gun went flying, and pressed his beak together to avoid snorting in laughter.

"Your shield blocked these energy waves entirely. May I see it?" Donald hesitated.

The shield was a project he and Uno had worked on together for years, a mix of Uno's programming and Donald's input, based on enemies he'd faced and ones he would face (time travel adventures being what they were). He knew he was being ridiculous, but Uno had

been gone for a long time, and Donald had precious few things of his left.

But. If the Blot's technology was going to be showing back up, the current heroes would need all the help they could get. Donald had something that could help. He needed to be less selfish, even if it felt like he was serving up his soul on a plate.

So, he nodded, silent, and turned the shield's magic barrier setting, holding it out in front of him, but not taking off the shield itself. Gizmo immediately whirled over to stand behind him, scanners whirring quietly as he looked the barrier over from the inside.

"How did you create it?" He asked eagerly, poking the interior and causing ripples across the surface. "It looks like an energy shield, but the wavelength it's blocking isn't one I've ever seen before." Donald tilted his arm so Gizmoduck could see the screen of his shield.

"Had a magic user throw spells at me until we could detect the right wavelength, then went from there. It took a while, but the Phantom Blot was using magic to power a number of different weapons, so it was the only way I was going to be able to fight him." Donald explained, tapping his fingers.

"Ah, right. Magic," Gizmo replied absently, face twisting awkwardly. Donald could practically see the calculations running through his head, debating whether to argue about the existence of magic or not. Donald sighed.

"Would it make you feel better if you think about it like a specific form of energy instead?" He asked, only a little sarcastic. Gizmo chuckled self-consciously.

“Er, it’s not that I don’t believe you…” he said slowly, clearly trying to find an alternative before he finished the sentence. He found nothing, and stopped. Donald waved him off, shutting down the shield.

“I’m used to nobody believing me. Call it whatever you want,” he said dismissively, waving his hand. Again, the temptation to just launch a fireball across the room. Again, the reasonable voice in the back of his head reminding him that Paperinik couldn’t do magic, and compromising his identity just to prove himself right wasn’t worth it.

The elevator dinged. Donald glanced up, expecting Darkwing, but it was Gyro that walked in, reading from a tablet, Boyd flying behind him. He glanced up when he exited the elevator entirely, looking first at Gizmoduck, still in the armor, then at Donald, mask in place. He blinked.

“You’re still alive?” He asked, utterly baffled, and Donald was torn between snorting in laughter and genuine offense.

“Haven’t managed to turn yourself into an abomination of science yet?” He asked instead of either. “I thought that was your goal before you turned 40.” Gyro’s glasses gleamed as he tilted his head. Boyd’s eyes tracked between the two of them anxiously, wringing his hands as he hovered behind his father.

“Um, hi Dr. Gearloose,” Gizmoduck interrupted, clearly trying to cut the rising tension. “We, er, that is- Paperinik assisted in the earlier fight, you may have seen it? And offered to assist in reviewing the situation, since the technology bears a resemblance to-”

“To the Phantom Blot,” Darkwing finished, appearing from the upper levels of the lab. Everyone in the room jumped; Donald had to commend the man, even he hadn’t noticed Darkwing enter the room.

Darkwing leapt down from his perch, cape fluttering. Despite the impressive entrance, his costume was slightly rumpled, like he had rushed to pull it on.

Gyro snorted, looking at the footage still on the monitor.

“The Blot’s plans were juvenile and barely worth the attention he got,” he grumbled, scanning through to where the power cells had exploded. “And this newcomer is hardly a threat if he couldn’t even create a machine with stable power cells.”

“The issue is that the Blot’s technology is unique, and hard to counter directly. He’s supposed to be in prison, and all of his remaining gear is still locked up,” Donald countered, walking forward to talk to Gyro directly. He glanced back at Darkwing briefly, who had walked up behind him to peer at the footage with a scowl.

“You think this is my copycat thief?” He asked Donald, looking irritated at the very idea. “If the tech matches, it would make the most sense.” Gizmo, from behind them, made an uncertain noise.

“Dr. Ghast only just arrived in the country a week ago,” he told them, tapping at a projection showing a flight manifest. “Before that he was in Germany. Looks like he shipped the parts into the country over the last few months, and built the portal machine when he arrived. But he can’t be your thief unless he was teleporting.” Darkwing nodded.

“I’ll look into German crime rates, see if there is a matching crime spree there,” Darkwing mused, “It could be that Ghast had an accomplice here. Do you know where he was having the machine parts delivered to?” Gizmoduck shrugged.

“It’s an empty warehouse, rented under his own name. Doesn’t look like he was trying to hide what he was up to.”

“He didn’t expect to lose, and on paper there was nothing illegal about shipping parts overseas. The dangerous part of it was the power cells themselves. Are they anywhere?” Donald asked. Gizmo glanced back at his projection, then shook his head.

“No, nothing here matches. Dr. Gearloose? Do you agree?” Gizmo asked, and they all turned (nearly in unison) to look at Gyro again. Gyro was looking over the energy signals from the fight, scowling.

“These readings make no sense,” he said, clearly to himself instead of replying. “Why don’t they make sense?”

Donald considered answering ‘because it’s magic readings,” but decided not to bother.

“I don’t see anything that matches the power cells on the list of materials, Mr. Gizmoduck,” Boyd offered, hovering up to look at the list. Donald wondered if he should be here, listening to this; the topic wasn’t entirely child friendly.

Boyd looked up at him, and for a moment his eyes glowed red. They went wide, staring, looking from him to the other adults in the room, then back.

“Are you Paperinik?” He asked. Donald nodded, and suddenly he had a child practically in his arms, grinning widely.

“You’re my friend Huey’s favorite hero! Can I get your autograph for

him? Please?"

Well. Donald could honestly say he hadn't been expecting that.

"Um, sure, I can do that," he answered. He was Huey's favorite hero? Why didn't he know that?

"You're friends with Mr. Donald, right?" Boyd asked, while Donald scribbled a signature for Paperinik on a piece of paper. He nodded, focusing more on making sure his handwriting didn't look like, well, his. Boyd grinned even wider, if possible, and carefully took the page and flew away.

Donald turned back to the other heroes, who were heatedly debating how the machine had been powered, with Gyro and Gizmo insisting that the readings made no sense, and Darkwing, to Donald's shock, saying that the energy was taken from magical items and people.

"I won't pretend that it doesn't sound insane, but I trust Paperinik's assessment, since he's the only one that's seen these readings before!" Darkwing exclaimed. "How do *you* explain his shield working when you can't even explain what that energy was?" Gyro rolled his eyes.

"Just because the has-been was able to find a solution doesn't mean that he's right about what it was. All magical things are just unexplained scientific phenomena," Gyro said, nose in the air. Donald walked back into the argument.

(Did he consider pointing out Manny the Man-Horse? Sure, but Gyro had had plenty of time to rationalize his existence)

“Isn’t that essentially what this is? An energy source that you can’t currently explain?” Donald asked casually, leaning against the desk and crossing his arms. Gyro’s eyes snapped to him, scowl deepening.

“Is that a challenge?” He snarled, and Donald internally grinned, while outside he only let a bland look cross his face.

Hook.

“I mean, if you can find another explanation for things, please go right ahead. My research was that the Blot, and apparently Dr. Ghast, were able to harness the collected magical energy housed in artifacts and some magic users. I even found a magical expert to help test some of that research. So if you’re certain it’s not that, I would assume you’re capable of proving it.”

Line.

Gyro’s face had taken on a determined, almost obsessive gleam.

“Oh, I can prove it,” he hissed, spinning to pour over the energy readings with new fervor. Donald caught Darkwing’s eye and grinned.

Sinker.

“Well, while you do that, we can work on the other factors,” Darkwing said, looking between Gyro and Donald for a moment before visibly pulling himself together and focusing on Gizmoduck. The rivalry that Donald had seen before was nowhere to be seen.

“One, we need to confirm if Ghast had an accomplice committing the robberies I’ve been investigating. I can work that angle,” Darkwing started, and Gizmoduck nodded.

“I’ll investigate the power cells. If they weren’t shipped here, he had to have another source, no matter how he powered them. Dr. Gearloose will, hopefully, be able to confirm that portion, but I can see where the raw materials came from.” Darkwing nodded. Gyro was in his own world, muttering about ‘non-scientific drivel’ and ‘caped idiots.’

Still not a good idea to cast a fireball, right? Right.

“I’ve been trying to speak to the Blot in prison, but thus far have been hitting a wall. Nobody seems to have access to him,” Darkwing was explaining now, while Donald considered the pros and cons of just casting magic and solving the debate. If Gyro could find a way of tracking magical energy then he might be able to track down anyone else using this technology, so it hardly mattered what he thought it was.

“Gotta say, Wing, I’m surprised you haven’t just tried to break into the prison yet,” Gizmo replied.

Donald felt a cold shudder run down his spine. Darkwing looked up, intrigued.

Bad idea, bad idea. Abort.

“You won’t be able to ask him much if you break in,” Donald pointed out. Then he paused, sighed, and added, “But you might be able to find out who visited him or contacted him in any way if you get into the prison records. They usually keep things on paper.”

Sure, it was a minor felony to do that, but it wasn't like the correct avenue had yielded any results. Donald could pretend plausible deniability at least, so long as his dual identities stood up to scrutiny.

Still, paper records were less secure than prisoners themselves, so there was a larger chance of things going just fine this way.

"Paperinik, you were going to reach out to some of the Blot's previous victims, weren't you? Anything come of that? I wasn't having any luck." Darkwing asked. Donald shook his head.

"Most of them went to ground afterwards, I haven't been able to find any of them yet," he explained. He'd searched, but none of them had remained in the normal world, retreating to either magical enclaves or possibly to other realms. He'd started looking into what realms they could have gone to, but had had no luck, and doubted he would. They had been *scared,* the theft of magic was far beyond what most magic users had to fear.

He had a sneaking suspicion that the only reason they hadn't had any magic victims this time was because most had fled the area, and few had returned.

Besides that, McDuck Manor and the Money Bin both gave off an odd magical signature because of the volume of artifacts housed there. While Donald was used to it, he'd heard from others that the feeling was unpleasant.

Darkwing scowled at the new dead end. With no leads on the thefts, their best suspect having a fairly solid alibi of being an entire ocean away, the power cells search was the only one they really had at the moment.

With nothing else they could go over at the moment, they started to disperse, before Gizmoduck called out to him.

“Wait, do you have a phone number? Or a way of reaching you? It would be easier to collaborate if we could reach you immediately,” he asked. Darkwing glanced at them both, quiet. Donald considered them both. Considered that he was supposed to be retired.

“I can’t give you my phone number,” he said slowly, “but if you’re able to rig something up I’ll take it.”

So Paperinik was out of retirement, it seemed. Just for this case, then back to the 151st storage locker.

The Donald Duck Connection Competition

Gizmoduck had been able to connect a communicator to his shield, which meant he would have to keep it with him, but it was the best he could do under the circumstances. The shield, now disguised as a wristwatch, felt heavy on his wrist. It had been a long time since he had carried it.

He tugged the cuff of his shirt over the watch as he got out of the car, noticing that the Sunchaser was sitting by the hanger, so the family was back, but nobody was outside. No sign of a crash in the yard, that was nice.

Cheerful chaos greeted him inside the Manor, piles of treasure littered the floor. The kids were laying dibs on various coins and knick-knacks, Scrooge divvying up portions and moving the lion's share to his own pile. Della was ignoring them all, telling the no-doubt entirely truthful highlights of the adventure.

“Unca Donald!” His arms shot out on instinct, catching the duckling before he could even think about it. From his arms, Webby grinned, practically vibrating with excitement. Donald felt his chest swell with joy at the title. No matter how many times he heard it, no matter how many nieces and nephews he had, it never failed to fill him with warmth.

“We found a pyramid full of treasure!” Louie called from the piles.

“And mummies to fight!” Webby and Dewey both shouted over each other, Webby twisting in his arms to show off a high kick. Donald fumbled, but kept her from falling to the floor.

“And we found a bunch of new carvings to look at! They’re really

cool, want to see?" Huey exclaimed, waving his phone screen in front of him. Donald made his way over, still holding Webby while she talked about the mummification methods used in the pyramid, to peer at the photos. Huey chattered a mile a minute, swiping through every photo carefully so Donald could see them. Webby added commentary, and Donald let their voices wash over him, smiling, as they argued over minute differences and whether a hieroglyph was an ibis or a crane.

"Unca Donald! " The screech had him whirling, Webby clutched to his side, Huey behind him blocked by one hand, before he had processed the scream was of excitement instead of fear. Slightly sheepish, he put Webby back on the ground and looked at Louie, who was uncharacteristically excited, staring at his phone instead of the piles of treasure.

"Paperinik was sighted in Duckburg today! Helping Gizmoduck!" He shouted, and suddenly all eyes were glued to the phone in Louie's hands, where Donald could just make out himself, shield up and glowing, defending himself and Gizmoduck from the explosion. He was surprised anyone had been close enough to get film, didn't people know to avoid hero fights?

"Blast, thought he died years ago," Scrooge said in surprise, looking down at the screen. "Wonder what got him out and moving again." He sounded oddly pleased that PK was still alive, and glanced briefly at Donald before looking back at the screen.

"The news is saying he just came out of nowhere to stop some doomsday device this afternoon! Maybe he saw it and decided he had to help?" Webby suggested, looking at her own phone now.

"This. Is. Awesome! We've got *three* superheroes now! Maybe I can convince them to let me join on as a sidekick! Ooh, no, a partner, who eventually takes over their superheroing before they get too old!" Dewey enthused. Donald immediately turned to him, shaking his

head.

“You’re too young for that, absolutely not!”

Dewey scowled, then paused, a sly expression crossing his face.

“So… how old is old enough?” He asked casually. Donald narrowed his eyes.

“Let’s say 16,” he finally said, “and only part time.” And now all eyes were on him, wide and disbelieving.

“Really?!” Dewey screamed, leaping at him; again, Donald managed to catch his kid before he hit the ground, and managed a laugh.

“Yes, really,” he replied, because in all honesty, he doubted that Dewey would stay interested in the job that long, and even if he did…

Donald had started at 15, and honestly didn’t think he could stop Dewey if he really, truly, wanted to be a vigilante. He was trying not to be so overprotective, and if he was being honest with himself, his kids would be more than capable of the job.

Or, well, he would make sure they were. The benefit of him secretly *being* one of those three heroes, after all.

“Well, that’s a surprise,” Della observed, staring at him like she had never quite seen him before, while Dewey jumped away to do some kind of victory dance. Donald shrugged, not willing to get into it at

that moment.

Dewey continued to cheer, before gasping and pointing at his siblings.

“And! I get the points for Paperinik! Boom! Double win for the Dewey/Gosalyn team!” He yelled, and held out his hand for a high five.

Nobody took him up on it, so he slapped his own palm, while Huey shook his head, a smug grin crossing his face.

“Unfortunately, dear Dewford,” Huey said, shaking his head slowly, “Boyd and I will get those points. He talked to Paperinik before we got back.” Dewey gasped in shock dramatically.

“What?! No fair, he practically lives with Gizmoduck!” He wailed. Huey shrugged, unconcerned, and glanced at Louie and Webby, who both glanced at each other and nodded.

“Rules are rules, Dewey, Boyd confirmed it first,” Louie told him pityingly, while Dewey continued to wail dramatically about ‘losing the only hero themed points.’

“Uh… whatcha talking about kids?” Della asked, leaning towards the group with a lost expression. Donald glanced around, and saw similar expressions on Scrooge, Bentina and even Penumbra’s faces.

“We’ve got a contest to find-” Webby started, before Huey gestured violently to cut her off, eyes wide. He turned to their mother with a nervous grin.

“Nothing, just a game. One that we…” Huey started, clearly reaching for a viable lie or half truth.

“One that we all decided would be forfeit if anyone talked,” Louie slid in smoothly, hands in his pockets and eyes half-mast. Della turned to him, frowning.

“Uh-huh… So, nothing I need to worry about?” She asked; Donald could tell she was trying to hit the skeptical parent tone, but landed closer to actually asking, her lack of confidence shining through. Louie nodded.

“Exactly, you get it. It’s just a little contest, nothing to worry about at all,” he assured calmly; Della nodded, slowly, and glanced at Scrooge, Bentina and Donald in quick succession. Donald nodded when her gaze landed on him, and she smiled.

“Well, alright then. Glad you guys are having fun!” She replied, and turned away. Behind her back, Louie winked at the others, smirk firmly in place.

Scrooge eyed Donald with mild curiosity, but went back to going through the treasure, pulling Della’s attention back to the piles instead. The boys rejoined Scrooge, and from behind them all, Bentina gave Donald a thoughtful look.

A hand tugged at his sleeve, and he looked down to see Webby staring up at him hopefully.

“Uncle Donald? If you’re not busy, can we have that dance lesson?” She asked, tentatively, hands leaving his sleeve to wring together.

Donald, exhausted from the fight, worried about the coming conversation with Agent 22 and the FOWL issues in general, felt his face light up. He nodded rapidly, reaching for her hand to lead the way to the ballroom. Webby's fingers clenched his tight, and she bounced along beside him as they moved quickly down the hallways.

The ballroom was, as the name implied, a large, grand room, with tall chandeliers and a beautiful marble floor meant for a large number of dancers. Of course, because Scrooge rarely had anyone at the Manor for such a gathering, the room was stuffy and abandoned, sheets thrown over the tables against the wall. Everything was clean at least, no cobwebs or huge layers of dust, but it was clearly an abandoned room.

Nevertheless, it had what Donald was looking for: a large open space, and a gramophone.

Webby was practically vibrating in place, fists clenched in front of her face as Donald brought out the various records and got the first one playing. Soft music filled the room; deserted though it was, the acoustics were perfect here.

"So! Let's start with a box step," Donald said, and took Webby's hands.

"I'll lead, it'll be easier for both of us, but I can teach you how to lead when you've gotten some practice," he explained, placing her hands on his upper arm and taking the first position. Webby's face went serious, focused, but her eyes were glowing with excitement. On the next beat, he led to the first step.

Webby was a quick study, following the basic movements easily, but

she struggled to do so at pace with the music. They stumbled into each other a few times before Donald lifted her up and onto his feet, twirling around the room while she giggled, clutching his arm.

"Count with me, come on," he urged, murmuring under his breath as they continued to spin, until Webby joined him, until her steps went smoothly with his. He didn't expect her to be perfect at this, was far more focused on keeping the smile on her face.

He didn't get a lot of time alone with Webby; usually when he saw her it was with the boys, or her granny, or even Scrooge, Webby trailing his uncle like, well, a duckling. It was nice to have one on one time, but eventually the music ended, and they had to wind down. Webby had had a long day of adventure after all, and Donald had fought a supervillain this morning.

He pulled two chairs out from under the sheets, plopping into one with a sigh. Webby swung her feet, giggling, while he told her about the last formal party Scrooge had taken him to.

"So there Scrooge is, floundering, while the duchess insists that he *has* to tango with her before she'll even consider showing him the prophecy. Della is gone, off arm wrestling with the security staff, so Scrooge just tosses me at her, face red as his coat, and shouts that Donald will take care of it!" Donald revealed, laughing at her wide eyes.

"Did you dance with her? Did she show you the prophecy?" Webby, always an enthusiastic audience, leaned towards him, gesturing wildly as she spoke. Donald laughed and nodded.

"Well I didn't want to be rude! Now, she was at least two feet taller than me, so it wasn't the most graceful dance, but I guess it was good enough," he replied. Della had said they looked utterly ridiculous

afterwards, but she said that about most things he did, so he took all of it with a grain of salt.

“So she gave me a copy of the prophecy, but *only* ,” he stressed, “if I didn’t show Scrooge. Because the Duchess thought he was so *rude* that he didn’t deserve to read it.” Webby snorted a laugh, covering her beak to muffle the sound. Donald didn’t bother, letting himself chuckle at the memory of Scrooge’s indignant face at that information.

“I bet he was steaming mad,” Webby giggled, and Donald nodded, laughing again. Scrooge had gotten over it by the time the adventure had ended, but at the time he had been furious, stomping back and forth in their room when Donald insisted on following the Duchess’ orders.

“Turned out to be mostly useless, though. Prophecies usually are, they only make sense after they come true,” Donald added, thinking about it. That one had predicted someone with the power of the sun would defeat a demon and claim the treasures it guarded. The result had been using a flashlight to blind it.

“You said that about the scroll we found,” Webby recalled, tapping her chin thoughtfully. “... You also said not to ask it how we would die?” She leaned towards him casually as she said it, not looking at him directly. He shook his head.

“No. Like I said, you’ll work yourself into a paranoid mess if you know that stuff, it’s not worth it.”

“Did you?” Donald blinked, turning to stare at Webby in surprise, but she was still staring away, swinging her feet. Her hands were clenched in her lap.

He considered her for a long moment, then sighed.

“I got a prophecy predicting my death once,” he said slowly, recalling the ancient oracle in the mountain temple they had met. “He predicted to the minute how long before I would die. I was terrified, kept trying to figure out what it would be. An adventure? One of Scrooge’s enemies? An accident?” He shook his head.

“I got so worked up wondering if I could prevent it that I was wasting what could have been my last few days, wrapping myself in bubble wrap and avoiding going outside.”

Webby glanced at him, brows drawn as her eyes scanned over him.

“But… you’re still alive, so he was wrong, right?” She asked, beak twisting at her own wording. Donald shrugged.

“I got hit by a freeze ray,” he explained, “so my heart completely stopped. They got it started again when I was thawed, but it was stopped long enough to fulfill the prophecy.” Webby’s eyes were large in her face, and slightly teary. He grasped her shoulder, then tugged her into a hug. Her face was wet against his shoulder.

“I’m fine, Webby. But it was a scary time for everyone, wondering what might happen, if we could stop it. Trust me, the warning isn’t worth it.” He said quietly, and her hands clenched around his shoulders.

They stayed like that for a while, before Webby pulled back, rubbing her eyes with a handkerchief. Donald gave her a reassuring smile.

“Now, let’s talk dances. Do you want to learn anything besides ballroom dance?” He asked, and Webby perked up.

“Ooh, what about salsa? Or swing?? I want to do one of those ones where you get to do flips!”

Donald couldn’t say he was shocked by that one.

“Hey, do you remember this photo?” Webby asked him, as they walked back to the kitchen for a drink. Donald glanced at the photo, already thinking about asking Bentina to move a small fridge or something for drinks to the ballroom, if these lessons were going to continue. Sure, they could use the gym, but the space was padded and not ideal.

So with only half an eye, he glanced at the swirl of pink and blue, and answered without much thought.

“Oh, that’s Daisy, we dated back in college,” he replied absently, recalling the image after a few minutes. A dance competition at a club they both frequented. They hadn’t actually known each other prior to that night, But Daisy’s date had bailed last second, and she had wanted to enter the competition. Donald had been there, and, well.

It had been a fun few years. But most of the time they had dated was during his Navy service (and then SHUSH). Long distance had been a struggle, but they’d both been convinced they could wait it out until he was back for college. When he had been back though…

Well. Things hadn’t worked out. He couldn’t completely regret it, meeting Daisy’s nieces had been a blessing, and there were certainly

fond memories with Daisy, but overall they hadn't been a good match.

"Ooh, a girlfriend?" She asked slyly, and Donald shook his head.

"Ex, Webby, we haven't seen each other in years." She looked disappointed.

"But you both look so happy here! Oh, what if you met up, and sparks flew, and-!" But Donald waved a hand, frowning.

"Webby. Please don't try to set up some kind of meeting with Daisy," he said seriously, and waited until she nodded to let his hand fall.

"We weren't that great together, trust me," he said. There was more, a lot more, but nothing that Webby needed to know.

Now, however, concerned that he would be somehow sent on a blind date with Daisy, Donald made a mental note to warn her. Or Bentina, maybe? Someone who could keep an eye out for any growing plots or schemes. He had enough trouble without *that* kind of trouble.

"But you liked dancing with her, I bet?" Webby asked, tilting her head knowingly. Donald chuckled, ruffling her hair.

"I like dancing in general! With Daisy, with you, with José and Panchito, the boys, Della…" he would have continued, but got distracted as they entered the kitchen, which was… a mess, to be kind about it.

A tempest was roaring its way out of a teapot, thrashing water everywhere while Bentina, Scrooge and Della tried to corral it back into the pot. The boys were casually chatting about something while moving dishes and other random kitchen items into the dining room.

Webby whooped and leapt into the room, all previous exhaustion long gone, while Donald sighed and looked for something to cover the teapot with, while around him everyone was yelling to be heard over the chaos.

“I’m just saying, hacking into a government computer system…”

“Come on Scrooge, the journal isn’t going anywhere, and I swear I have a lead on this lost temple in Peru-”

“Boys, if you could make sure to move the chairs as well, I’m afraid they’ll take some time to dry if they’re in here much longer!”

“Aw come on, it’s technically public record, and the rules *you* wrote say-”

Donald slammed the cloche onto the top of the teapot, and the tempest retreated with a wet gurgle.

Always an adventure with this family, he thought with a snort, as the plume of water previously held up by the tempest spout fell in a gush over his head.

Where is the Blot?

Donald ended up with a meeting with Agent 22 scheduled for right after her meeting with Director Ravenson, all of which was after his trainee class, so he tried to keep himself distracted with the trainee agents. Their current assignment was a faux mission through the building, which was intended to take the whole day.

Officially speaking, everyone had been told they were being tested on completing the objective. Unofficially, everyone had also been told there was at least one person working for the opposition who would be sabotaging the mission, and their secondary goal was to find that person and take them out before they were able to sabotage the objective, a simple data retrieval that Agent RN had helped to set up using the currently unused office spaces on the top three floors.

Donald already knew some of them had scoped out the area, either for their earlier break into the classroom challenge, or in preparation for this specifically. He was pleased to see they were finally thinking outside the box without him giving them the same test over and over. Rigid thinking was the death knell of so many agents, unable to recover to rapid changes in their missions.

And so few missions went to plan, he was still terrified to let them out in the field. Apparently his over protective nature extended to even his students, who knew?

Most of the people he knew, probably, but since none of them had been consulted prior to him becoming an instructor, that hadn't stopped him.

He'd called in the rest of the training crew to watch the agents, to take notes of performance and to make sure they pulled anyone that was 'killed' or failed in some way. He himself had the security feeds

running in their usual meeting room, where he was making his own notes. In all honesty, he had wanted the other agents watching the trainees to get other opinions, because they probably were ready to go to paired missions. A few more of these mini missions, the completion of the Weapons theft assignment, and they were as ready as he could make them.

Two of his trainees burst into the room, followed by Agent RN, who looked highly amused. One had a marker line across his throat feathers, the other had black dyed teeth and an empty coffee cup.

“T86 murdered me!” The agent with the marker, K17, exclaimed, flopping into his seat with a scowl. Agent T86 grinned viciously back.

“You should have picked a faster acting poison,” she replied, setting the coffee cup down to reveal it was as black as her mouth.

“You’re a counter agent!” He shouted.

“Alright, settle down. Agent T86, can you tell me what happened?” Donald asked. Behind him, there was a polite cough, but he assumed it was another agent coming in about the training and didn’t turn to look.

“I was working on the security cameras when Agent K17 handed me the coffee. Halfway through drinking it, he told me that it had been poisoned, and that I had thirty seconds to live before I had a heart attack. So, I slashed his throat and wrote a note on the wall that he had killed me, for when the others find me,” Agent T86 explained, holding up the marker she had clearly used for said throat slashing. Donald raised a brow; her reaction time had been fast.

He glanced at Agent RN to confirm, but she was looking behind him at

the doorway.

He got an abrupt, foreboding feeling as he turned to look. An agent he didn't recognize offhand stood in the doorway. Behind her was Agent 22.

"Sorry to interrupt, Agent Double Duck, but Agent 22 asked if she could observe your training course today. Is that alright?" The other agent asked nervously, wringing her hands. Donald blinked, then glanced at 22, who was watching him without any expression on her face. Her eyes scanned across his, but her poker face was impeccable; he had no idea what she was thinking.

"That's fine by me," he finally replied, and watched mild surprise ripple across her face when he spoke. But with other people there, he couldn't exactly address the elephant in the room, so for now he ignored it, turning back to the room.

"Agent K17, your report?" He asked, drawing everyone's attention again, and K17 swallowed audibly, scratching at the feathers on his throat.

"I, ah, came to the conclusion that Agent T86 was our counter agent, and decided to take her out before she could interfere with the mission objective. I told her the drink had been poisoned when she had consumed enough to be a lethal dose, and she used the last 30 seconds to slash my throat." Agent RN nodded at that, so he assumed that the description was correct.

"Why do you think that T86 is the counter agent?" He asked next. K17's face twisted with irritation.

"She was taking a lot longer than reasonable to complete mission

objectives," he explained, while T86 stuck out her blackened tongue. "And kept trying to find opportunities to slip away instead of staying in pairs like the team had decided at the beginning."

"Because I thought you were going to try to kill me," she responded evenly, which was fair enough.

"And I was taking my time to make sure that I didn't trigger the actual security systems in the building; we were told that everything was live, and the last thing we wanted was the security team taking us down!" She explained in irritation. K17 turned to glare at her; Donald hoped that they were just being competitive, because if they had these issues with each other, that would need to be addressed, and it was a bit beyond him at the moment.

"I see. You both can take a seat, we're watching the rest of the team continue the mission. I will let everyone know who was on what side when everyone is back," Donald said, and the room went quiet.

22 was a large presence behind him, but he needed to focus on the monitors, and that meant he couldn't look at her for further reactions. She was a well trained agent, so he didn't doubt that she could keep any questions or reactions to herself until they were alone, but he still felt her presence weighing on his shoulders while he turned back to his work.

Agent RN left to help monitor the remaining trainees, and the room went quiet while Donald continued to observe. In truth, he had one eye on the monitors, one on his email while he waited for Ravenson to email him the results of the prison probe. Apparently his email had finally gotten them to move on the issue, and so two agents had been dispatched to both of the potential prisons that the Blot was being housed at, with instructions to come back with either the transfer paperwork, the Blot, or both.

He'd sent a message to Darkwing with the update, and kept his growing paranoia about the situation to himself. But the Blot had been powerful, rich, and had had powerful friends. He'd needed overwhelming evidence to even get the police to take him in, and more to keep him in prison. His communications were supposed to be monitored heavily, his visitors rare and under constant supervision. Clearly standards had fallen in the last two decades, or the new prison hadn't gotten the memo on the threat level, but something had gone wrong, and it was making his skin crawl that he didn't know *what.*

So he was sitting, tense, jittery, as the other trainees trickled in, watching the monitors and his inbox, waiting for answers and wondering what Bentina was going to ask, if she would ask, or if it would be a silent secret between them.

He wasn't used to people finding out his secrets, outside of people that were just as involved as he was. Uno had been interested, even excited, to join in hero work, and both the Caballeros and the Kingdom Hearts nonsense had pulled him and his friends in together, and pacts of secrecy were made. This was now the second time that someone, that Bentina specifically, would be able to ask questions.

Donald didn't know how he would answer any of them, and had no time to come up with excuses or a false story. He had the Blot to worry about, and FOWL's unusual movements, and he'd only just gotten back from several months in an alternate dimension fighting monsters made from darkness and rage. And those were just the major issues; Drake had messaged him about taking the kids out somewhere, a not-so-subtle request to speak to him buried in the text, the Caballeros were moving north soon, Della was getting pushy about him coming on another adventure and he had no idea why she was so determined, shouldn't she be relishing time with the boys?

So he wasn't paying much attention as the remainder of his group arrived, some complaining of various attacks and declaring who was the true villain, as everyone got their stories out. Donald debated having the 'dead' agents leave the room, since they obviously couldn't provide information if they were dead, but decided that would limit

their ability to benefit from the exercise and kept them in. The older agents who had been monitoring the exercise lined the walls, watching with barely disguised interest.

“Living agents first; walk me through your objectives, what was accomplished and what wasn’t,” he ordered, and one by one they spoke.

Most of the trainees had focused on their own objectives, and 330 explained that their reasoning ran, whoever didn’t complete theirs would clearly be the counter agent, so they focused on finishing the mission fast enough to identify what was left.

“And did you come to a consensus as to who that was?” Donald asked, glancing around the room. The ‘dead’ trainees were silent, looking at each other, then at their killers. Besides his first set, one of the eagles, agent 525, had taken out agent 876 with a stabbing using a pencil.

330 shook his head, glancing at the lost agents with a frown.

“We didn’t. None of the murders happened with witnesses, so we have no way to know for sure who it was or if it was even the same person,” he admitted. Some of the other trainees had mulish and unhappy expressions; clearly, they did have opinions on the matter, and had been overruled.

He let them go on, confirming that the main objectives of the mission (the data theft, the wiping of the security system, photos of key locations) had all been completed, and he had already checked the security system; they had not been caught. Which was a slight concern for the security team at their base, but it wasn’t a concern of Donald’s. He had warned them that the trainees may be better than they thought.

He let everyone cast an anonymous vote for who they thought was the counter agent, and then left them to chat with the dead agents to see what lined up.

720 looked baffled. And irritated.

“So you all turned on each other? We thought someone was taking you out one by one!” She exclaimed, affronted. T86 scowled.

“I avenged myself, that’s all! He thought I was the counter agent and poisoned me!” And stuck out her tongue to demonstrate the black dye.

“When did you approve weapons?” One of the trainers asked, while the trainees continued to argue. Donald glanced over, shrugged.

“I didn’t say they couldn’t use weapons,” he said simply. He hadn’t even said they could kill other agents. But he could hardly argue with their reasoning; he had said to treat the mission as a real one, afterall.

Agent 22 was eyeing him from her place against the wall, but said nothing. He turned back to the group.

“Alright, alright. Now, before we confirm who was the counter agent, does anyone have any other commentary for the mission today?” He asked, and the room went quiet.

The votes were tallied up, and he put the results on the board. Almost every trainee had at least one vote, and there were two guessing it was actually him. He tapped those marks thoughtfully.

“I’ll give that partial points, since I did assign the counteragent,” he finally concluded, and was rewarded by a snort of laughter.

“Now, if the counteragent could please stand up?” He asked. And waited as Agent 876 and Agent 720 both stood up, blinking at each other in confusion.

There was a pause. Then the room exploded in noise. Most of which was incomprehensible, so Donald just leaned back in his chair and let them yell. Agent RN, against the wall, looked surprised and a bit amused, but was trying to hide it. 22 wasn’t even trying to hide her snort of laughter.

330 had his head in his hands, muttering something under his breath, but Donald had no hope of hearing it.

“Did you expect to get a clear warning of how many people may be secretly working against you?” He asked mildly, when a brief lull in shouting allowed him to be heard. Slowly, people sunk back in their seats. Donald took the opportunity to sit back up, drawing every eye in the room.

“You know how we do things here,” he pointed out, and gestured at the ‘dead’ agents, “If I don’t give a rule, it isn’t one. You can’t assume there will only be one counteragent, or that there will be one at *all* , no matter that the mission briefing mentioned the possibility. Some of you decided to focus on the primary goal, and in this case you were mostly successful ignoring the possibility of a counteragent working against you.

“Some of you focused on finding the spy, and two people were killed that were all on the same side. That’s what happens when you jump to

conclusions. Two members of your team were taken out by friendly fire," he repeated for emphasis, because as amusing as their improv was on the surface, that was beyond unacceptable. "There's always a chance someone is working against you, and there will be no briefing confirming it. You need to pay attention to discrepancies, and trust your instincts, but there's a line. Today it was a training exercise. Tomorrow it could be a field mission."

He paused here, slightly hesitant. The issue was, they needed field agents to trust each other, to bond and be able to predict each other's likely moves even without being able to speak. It was just as important as trusting their instincts when something felt wrong.

"If nobody has any questions, you're released for the rest of the day," he finally said. "I've sent out your next assignment via email, and you've got your other project to work on."

Training was so difficult, Donald reflected as they left, when he had to teach them to both trust their instincts, and trust each other. He was so very terrified they would be hurt, by their job or each other, or a counteragent from FOWL, or any of a thousand other options.

He had to remind himself that they were adults, that they had chosen this role and all he could do was make sure they were as trained as they could be.

Nobody had any questions, so he made his way out of the room, checking again in his inbox and seeing nothing. Ravenson hadn't expected to get an immediate response anyway, but Donald couldn't help but to check, hoping for an early answer anyway.

Behind him, the other trainer agents were quiet as they left the room, some already typing up their reports. Donald would have to go through those, and the trainee's personal ones, when he had time.

Thankfully, the presence of the other agents meant that they would be writing their own conclusions and recommendations for further training.

22 followed him silently through the halls until they reached his rarely-used office. Donald didn't speak, dropping his things on his desk and sweeping for bugs. Sure, he trusted SHUSH, but there was trust and there was being naive.

Bentina settled into the chair across from his desk as he fell into his own; even sitting she was intimidatingly tall and broad, and she continued to give him an unreadable expression.

"So…" she began, and Donald braced himself. "Does your class realize you had them playing Among Us all day?"

Donald choked on a laugh, the tension leaving him in a rush.

"Don't tell them," he finally managed to spit out on a chuckle, "they think I'm too old to realize it." Bentina gave him a small smile, and if Donald wasn't mistaken, her shoulders relaxed a smidge as well.

He let the room fall into silence, taking a long breath.

"I suppose you have questions," he sighed, running his fingers over his head. Bentina gave him a long look, lips pursed.

"A few, I suppose. But not the ones you're thinking of. After some consideration, this… does make sense," she said slowly, hands clasped neatly in her lap. "More so after this weekend's events. You're more adept at keeping secrets than I realized." Donald tilted his head

slightly in acknowledgement.

"It isn't very hard, in this family," he said quietly, "Nobody asks that many questions if you just… don't talk much." Bentina gave him a sharp gaze, but didn't respond directly.

"I did always wonder why nobody had attempted to recruit you," she admitted, and Donald went stiff with surprise. "Della, I could understand, she's a loose cannon even if she was interested. But you… How did you keep it from me? I wasn't retired until the boys were born, you haven't been active while the boys were infants… were you?" Donald shook his head, probably too fast, too frantic.

On some level, he was always waiting for someone to say he hadn't done well by the boys; he should have stayed with Scrooge, should have gotten a better job, should never have been an agent while they were in his care. Should have should have should have-

"No, of course not. I was recruited after the Navy, but I went inactive while the boys were little. I just… I knew Scrooge was occasionally asked to help on missions, so when I was recruited I asked that they specifically keep my identity away from him. I guess they included you in that?" He'd never asked about the details, too busy balancing his frankly excessive number of obligations.

"Perhaps," she said vaguely, then her eyes focused back on him. "Well, going forwards, I would suggest we keep each other informed about any future missions, so ensure that there is at least one person aware if something goes wrong. I had planned to speak to you about this once I returned to the Manor, but, well." She gestured vaguely at his office. Donald nodded, secretly feeling warmed inside that she had planned to trust him to that extent. It was more than just a person to check in on; it meant she trusted him enough to take care of Webby, if something kept her away.

“So, secret agent, alternate dimension travels… I’m almost afraid to ask if you have any other secrets,” she said with a chuckle. Donald forced one as well, and hoped she stayed that way.

Bentina left, to continue reviewing the building and meeting with upper agents. She confirmed that she intended to primarily be an informant, not a field agent. She seemed surprised that Donald fully intended to be in the field, but said nothing, her face thoughtful as she left.

Alone once again, Donald started sorting through every report and recording from the day’s training mission, trying to get through everything he could before the other shoe dropped. If the conversation with Bentina went well, he could only expect something else to go wrong.

330 had been one of the leaders in the mission, trying to corral everyone to work on their objectives and ensure that they at least completed the mission, even if they didn’t get the counteragent. His focus had been on making sure the mission itself was completed.

720 had worked within the confines of the group decisions, staying in her group and taking openings to sabotage when they were handed over instead of making her own chances. Best Donald could see, she had been focused on not getting caught, more so than sabotaging the mission.

876 on the other hand had been more proactive in his attempted sabotages, which had resulted in him being taken out earlier in the mission. Donald made a note of each approach to review their reports later, then continued on with the rest of the trainees.

A ping from his email. And as he was fumbling to wake up the screen and open the message, another one.

He'd been CC'd in the chain between the agents sent to both Calisota Federal Prison and Upstate Prison; the Blot was supposed to be in Upstate, but the Warden had insisted he had been transferred to Calisota, so Ravenson had sent agents to both locations.

Director Ravenson, Agent DD,

I have been all over the entire prison, and the Phantom Blot is not being held here. His file is still on-site, but the transfer paperwork is missing most of the pages, leaving only a signed transfer approval by the Warden, dated a year ago. There is nothing indicating why the transfer was requested, or who requested it. I have asked the Warden, but he doesn't recall signing it. He has said he has a number of transfers going in and out, so he was fairly certain he had signed it and had simply forgotten.

I was able to find a guard that oversaw the transfer itself. He said that everything went smoothly, but one thing that struck him as strange at the time was the fact that the Phantom Blot was the only transfer that day. Apparently it's unusual unless the prisoner is being used as a witness for some ongoing case, but as Agent Redwing has previously confirmed, no agencies were seeking out the Blot's expertise.

Everything here indicates the Blot was here until an approved transfer went through, and he left on schedule on a prison bus.

-Agent Bluebeak

And the second email only a minute later:

To: Director Ravenson, Agent Double Duck,

I have spoken to every guard, staff member, the Warden, even some of the prisoners here at Calisota Federal Prison and nobody has ever seen the Phantom Blot here. The Warden allowed me complete access to her files, and there is nothing about a transfer in a three week window around the supposed transfer date. Not even a call or email between the two prisons, which would have been the normal procedure.

I see no sign that the Blot was ever brought here.

-Agent Brownbill

Donald stared at the screen for a long time, until it started to go dim from inactivity. He felt numb, stiff, as his fingers finally met the keys.

Agent Bluebeak,

Please get any video footage of the transfer the prison has available. Everything from the moment the transfer bus arrived until the paperwork went to the Warden's office. We need to see every person that was involved with the transfer.

At this point we need to accept that we are seeing the worst-case scenario: the Blot was broken out of prison during a fake prison transfer.

-Agent Double Duck

Senora dances Calypso

Donald had been in a fog for days. Go to work, focus on the investigation into the Blot, go home and continue researching with his own resources. The trainee agents were still running training missions, but the other agents were largely handling it, so his day was clear. He was trying to keep his family from noticing his distraction, aided by their usual hobbies and disinterest in his life. Webby had apparently found boxes of old photos and other memorabilia buried in some attic space that she was excitedly making the boys help her sort through, which was all kinds of helpful, even if he wondered how there was anything she hadn't already uncovered.

Della was still trying to convince him to go on more adventures with them, leaving him all but frozen with indecision. Go with the family, keep them in his sights at all times and make sure they could never be a target of the Blot, or focus every moment he had on finding the criminal himself? What was the best action? What would keep his family safer? Thankfully, they hadn't gone on any new trips, due to terrible weather downing the plane for the last week.

Scrooge had been… odd. Lingering on the edges of rooms that Donald was in, always with a viable reason to be around, and rarely speaking. He was just there, humming and murmuring to himself, and occasionally looking up as though to confirm Donald was still present. Donald didn't remotely have the energy to address it, he wasn't even sure if he was imagining it or not. Maybe Scrooge was always in these rooms at these times and Donald was interfering with his schedule, who knew? But Donald couldn't stand being in the houseboat alone, with all this fear and paranoia buzzing in his brain, so he ignored the unusual behavior while he desperately sorted through one of his earliest nightmares coming back to haunt him.

In the first few hours of the overwhelming mass of problems, Donald had created a rough plan. First, he had checked in with Darkwing and Gizmoduck. Primarily to give them the update, but also to plan a meet up to provide his pieces of the Blot's original weaponry. With the confirmation that the Blot was free, and likely either orchestrating or

at least funding the attack by Dr. Ghast and the earlier museum break-ins, he needed everyone on the same page, and that meant giving them the same information he had to work with.

Both heroes were surprisingly… calm, about the news. Maybe just unsurprised. Darkwing Duck had replied with a confirmation that he had suspected as such, and had started into his museum research with new vigor, now that they knew the Blot had likely been directly involved. Donald didn't know what there was to find, but Darkwing had seemed determined, so he let it go. An avenue he could leave, for now.

Two, he had to reach out to the former Blot victims and make sure they were aware of the threat. Sure, SHUSH had confirmed that they would also be reaching out to the ones they could find, as they were taking the helm on the search for the missing terrorist, but Donald felt responsible for it. The Blot had been *his* villain, his job to take down and make sure he stayed down. Not to mention, he'd already explored the avenues available to civilians and government agents, and had had no luck, so he doubted SHUSH would do any better.

He'd finally reached one of his magical contacts, a woman named Morgana, to pass along the news, and to offer to meet up in person to give more details. She had said she had some contact information for other victims and offered to pass along what information he could give, which was a great time saver. Her choice of meeting location was a bit odd, but Donald imagined she was hoping they wouldn't catch too much attention.

Three, help review the footage from the prison. SHUSH was isolating every single person that had been into the prison during the Blot's incarceration from the security footage, starting with the day of the escape and working backwards. They were keeping a running list of faces, with other agents identifying them and adding their data. Thus far they'd tentatively ruled out a number of guards and staff members of the prison, as well as prisoners that had been released or transferred prior to the escape. It was a massive undertaking, made so much more difficult by the fact that the driver of the transport van

had never entered the prison, and their sign-in was fake.

Donald was going through any names identified, running them through his old files and wishing desperately that he was better at this kind of research. Uno was the one that was good at data analysis, and at so many other things. Donald missed him so much it ached; he had given up Paperinik because of how big of a hole Uno's deactivation had left, and it only felt worse now.

Thankfully for his sanity, Gizmoduck had leapt in here, offering his services to sort through the data with his own servers; Donald had passed along the contact information for the SHUSH agents working it and took a breath.

In truth, despite his preoccupation with the search and fear of one of his more dangerous enemies being free now, he wasn't as… needed on this case. SHUSH was using their numerous agents to do the data sorting on who had orchestrated the break-out, Darkwing was on the ground looking into the museum heists and had the time to explore the smallest clues and hints. The things that needed to be done were being done. And while Donald had his previous experience, and he was certainly no slouch at hero work, he'd been retired for years and had limited contacts still available. He couldn't just fly off to look into things himself.

In short, he felt helpless, no leads and no way to offer assistance in finding some.

So it was a small relief when Bentina asked (from another person, he may have said begged) for him to go with Launchpad to take the kids to Funzo's Funzone to meet with Drake and Gosalyn. A distraction, no matter how anxious he was right now, would do him good and hopefully clear his mind.

He was suspicious that Bentina had ulterior motives, but whether she had realized he needed the distraction, didn't trust Launchpad alone with the kids for the entire day, or just wanted the house empty for a while, Donald didn't know. Maybe it was something else entirely; they were closer now, sure, but Bentina still had her own secrets, and he could hardly blame her.

Drake looked just as tired as he did, while the kids bolted towards the arcade and some new game that Donald didn't catch the name of. He was slumped against the table, phone set screen up in front of him. He looked up in relief when Donald sat down, pushing the phone a bit away from him and clutching at his plastic cup instead.

Launchpad fell into his own seat, letting Drake lean against him while Donald lowered himself, feeling wrung out.

"Bad week?" Drake asked, sipping at his cup absently. Donald let out an unamused snort.

"Yeah, you could say that," he grumbled. He fiddled with his own cup, but didn't take a drink.

"It's been a weird week in the house at the Manor, with the Sun Chaser being downed by the rain; the kids were getting all kinds of nuts," Launchpad said, throwing an arm around Drake's shoulders and glancing towards the arcade; Donald could just hear Dewey cheering about something.

"Ah, everyone going stir crazy?" Drake joked, but it fell flat; Donald managed a laugh anyway.

"Kids, and Scrooge and Della, honestly, are used to being able to jet off every couple of days. An entire week of no adventures, they're

itching for something to do. I'm hoping they don't pick anything too destructive," he chuckled. They were used to having strange mysteries to investigate, adventures to go on. Without those options, the kids collectively tackled any and all new games and activities they could get their hands on.

He had half considered letting them tackle the Phantom Blot investigation, while sleep deprived three days ago (or had it been four?). Then he had gotten some sleep and dismissed the thought as insane. Adventures were not the same as domestic terrorist plots, no matter how hyper competent his kids were.

Drake shook his head in amusement, and the table fell silent, all three men drinking cold Pep and watching the kids and families running around and screaming.

"Hey, unca Donald! Can we take Gosalyn fishing on the houseboat next time we go out? She's never been!" Dewey hollered from the arcade. Donald winced at the volume, no matter that everyone else in the building was just as loud, and glanced at Drake.

"So long as her dad agrees, that's fine!" He called back when Drake nodded, and Dewey disappeared again.

"No idea when *that* will be though," Donald continued to himself, downing the last of his drink with a sigh.

"That reminds me… I've been wanting to ask, why is the boat, er, in the pool?" Drake asked, leaning forward on one elbow. Donald glanced up and made a face.

"It got damaged a while back, Scrooge offered to house everyone while I was doing repairs. And when I got it fixed, the boys were

settled in the Manor, and with Della back and everything… it's been easier staying where we are. Can't go out on the water as easily, but besides that it's been… fine."

In all honesty, he missed the ocean more than he had realized he would, even if they had only rarely taken the boat out on a trip. The waves, the smell, the sounds- they had lulled him to sleep for years, and even still technically being on water wasn't enough to make it feel like home.

"Is that why you're always wearing a sailor uniform? Cause you live on a boat?" A new voice asked; Donald glanced down to see Gosalyn peering up at him from the side of the table, one hand in her dad's jacket pocket. He blinked at her, then glanced down at his shirt. Honestly, he had long forgotten he was wearing the old uniform.

"Sort of," he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck, "When I was in the Navy I had a tendency of destroying my uniforms in weird accidents. Eventually the quartermaster gave me a crate of them so I didn't have to come back over and over again for new ones." He shrugged, tugging on the cuff of the shirt. The hem was starting to fray, but he could probably patch it at least one more time before it came apart. Besides a new suit for work, he hadn't really bought anything for himself in over a decade.

"Wait! You mean the only reason you always wear a sailor suit is because you still have a bunch?!" Louie demanded from behind him. Donald turned to stare at him, seeing the other kids were approaching as well.

"Yes? They were already there, and it seemed like a waste of time and money to buy more," he replied, baffled as the boys stared at him in shock.

“We thought you were just *really* into sailor suits!” Dewey shouted, waving his arms wildly.

“We have a box of them in the storage room,” Donald pointed out, glancing at Huey, who hadn’t said anything yet, and looked thoughtful.

“How many do you have left? You’ve been wearing them since we were born…” Huey said, trailing off as a thought clearly occurred to him. Donald shrugged, beak twisting in thought.

“No idea, haven’t looked in a while. Probably getting down there now,” he admitted after a moment. The boys glanced thoughtfully at each other, which was concerning, but Webby chose that moment to ask if they could order pizza, and the conversation was thoroughly derailed into an argument over toppings.

Long after, as the kids wandered off again to play more games, Drake leaned towards him.

“So… you go through a lot of shirts too? I lose a lot in stunt practice,” he whispered in a conspiratorial tone, and Donald laughed.

“Probably once a week at least! What’s the weirdest accident you’ve had?”

The brief respite had been nice, but as soon as they returned to the Manor, Donald had to move again. He had to meet with Morgana tonight, and she had asked him to meet her at a club.

He was, funnily enough, familiar with the place; it was a dance club he used to go to with Daisy. It was a beautiful old place, chandeliers

and intricately patterned drapes and wallpaper. There was a stage with a live band; Donald had played there a few times, some with the Caballeros, some without, but he'd been there mostly as a dancer.

He'd met Daisy here, his last few days before shipping out the first time. They'd spent nights dancing and talking, and then months writing letters and chatting over the phone, until he'd finished service and started taking classes at New Quackmore. Where everything had fallen apart, slowly and then all at once.

He hadn't been there in a number of years, but he remembered they had a dress code, and his sailor uniform would not cut it. Nor would his work shirts, if only because he didn't want to risk being recognized as Double Duck.

Which left a vanishingly small number of options, unless he wanted to borrow something.

He did not.

So it was digging through a box of things from before the boys had been born. Mixed in with a few old textbooks (why) and photos (he could probably hang these up, he hadn't realized they were here), he found a number of flannels he had long forgotten about and two dress shirts in dark blue.

He wouldn't have thought about it, had the kids not had such a reaction to his usual clothes. He hadn't thought about how rarely he wore anything else. Clearly the boys had noticed; he wondered what they thought of him wearing a suit to work now.

He checked the mirror briefly before he left, already dressed and ready to go, and noted he needed a haircut; it was getting long, and

his sideburns would make him look like Uncle Scrooge if he waited much longer. But it was presentable enough, for now.

He only intended to poke his head inside to let someone know he was going out for the night, since he had to meet with Morgana soon, but as he reached the door it burst open, spilling the kids across the lawn, Dewey falling into his arms with a shout.

“You *do* own other clothes!” he shrieked, and Donald winced, letting his squirming nephew fall to the ground. Webby jumped up to take his place, hands braced on his upper arms while she stared at his eyes.

“You look really nice uncle Donald! Are you going on a date!” She demanded, leaning even closer. Donald blinked at her, baffled, before slowly dawning dread crept up his spine as he cast a fearful gaze at the three boys. They watched him back, laser focused, resembling three tigers stalking prey instead of three children. He gulped.

“No, not a date,” he managed, forcing his eyes back to Webby, “I’m meeting up with an old coworker, and she chose a nicer place.” He ignored Dewey’s accusation; he’d spent too much time talking about his clothing today as it was.

“Are you sure? Cause the last time you dressed up for anything other than a job interview was, er…” Huey trailed off, pressing his lips together.

“Never. Literally never,” Louie finished in a deadpan, staring at Donald with a suspicious expression. Donald sighed, setting Webby down slowly.

“I’m not going on a date. This is more of a work meeting than a dinner, so I’m dressed nicer for it. That’s all,” he explained, feeling

exhausted. He hadn't dated since the boys had hatched, and he would admit, he had never thought about how they would handle it. Now they were staring at him, Huey stressed, Dewey intense, and Louie clearly suppressing something.

"I would tell you if I was dating someone," he told them, trying to make eye contact with all of his kids. Dewey snorted, eyes wild.

"Of course it's not a date tonight! Just a work dinner thing, at some… fancy restaurant that… you need to dress nice for. Obviously!" He exclaimed, reaching out to take a handful of his brothers' shirts and dragging them off. Webby paused, watching with clear confusion while the boys disappeared into the house, before trailing after.

Donald sighed, accepting that later he would have to check back in to find out exactly what they were worried about. Was that reaction at the idea of him dating? Or some new problem he had missed?

He had to shelve the issue as he went into the club. He was the first one there, so sat alone with a glass of water and watched the dance floor move with people. It was a swing night, and the swirling skirts and rapid twirls made him smile.

It had been years since he'd been here. Not since the boys had been born, if he thought about it. The club hadn't really changed; they were leaning into old glamour, so the walls and lights sparkled with gild and gold, the floor was polished to a shine, and everyone was dressed to the nines.

He was glad they were doing well. He'd never seen the club without a decent crowd, but dance halls weren't exactly *in,* at the moment.

A small cough, and Morgana sat across from him at the small table,

hair in a perfectly coiffed up-do. She gave him a polite smile, but there were clear bags under her eyes. He imagined he didn't look that much better.

"Donald. I wish we were seeing each other under better circumstances," she said, and Donald nodded. The last time he'd seen her, they'd been standing over the bed of one of the Blot's victims. The jay, whose name they never found, slipped into a coma from the shock and never woke back up.

Morgana had been younger then, less worn around the eyes, but at that moment, she had looked a thousand years old, holding the limp feathered hand as the machines beeped. She had sworn that she would make the Phantom Blot pay for this, in this life or the next.

"I promise we are all doing everything we can to catch him and put him back behind bars," he swore, skipping the niceties.

"Or elsewhere," she returned sharply. Donald should protest, but he couldn't honestly say he disagreed. The Blot's plans were horrendous, and the experiments he had done to create his technology had been an abomination of science and magic. His surviving victims had been so badly scarred that Donald knew many of them had moved out of this realm entirely, living in magical realms that at least replicated the feeling of still having their magic.

Which was why he was reaching out to Morgana, who had contacts everywhere. They knew her, they trusted her. Thankfully she already knew him as a friend of Paperinik from the Blot's first run, because Donald was far beyond trying to maintain his identity.

"So, the Blot," she said quietly, and Donald leaned closer. The sound of the music and dancing covered their voices.

“The Blot. We don’t know who got him out, but he’s either supplying his tech or being forced to. The attack on Duckburg was with an updated version of his old doomsday device,” Donald explained tiredly, letting his head fall into an open hand with a sigh.

Morgana pursed her lips.

“I haven’t found any attacks or disappearances, nothing like the first time; have you heard anything?” He asked quietly.

She shook her head.

“Good, that’s good. We’ve got a lot more people looking this time, but we don’t know who he’s working with yet… Right now I just want to make sure that everyone in the community, especially the people he targeted before, are aware of the threat,” Donald explained, after taking a moment to breathe out, slowly.

“I can spread the word, see if anyone has heard anything. Maybe he decided living subjects were too much trouble this time; magical artifacts are easier to find,” Morgana speculated hopefully. Donald shrugged in response; the Blot had made it clear, upon his capture, that he despised magic and magic users. The harm to living people used in his experiments had likely been part of the point.

They spent a few minutes going over his previous victims that Morgana had news about; most of her news was that they had fled to the far corners of the earth, hiding and trying to recover from the attacks. Donald asked if any progress had been made in helping restore their innate magic, but there had been none; the result of the magic being removed (or perhaps it was when it was used?) was permanent.

Morgana eyed him thoughtfully, chewing on her tongue for a moment.

“I appreciate you meeting me personally,” she told him, “and I will get the word out. We have more warning this time.”

And then she stood, grabbing his hand and pulling him towards the dance floor. Donald, startled, didn’t think to stop her until they were already out in the crowd, and his hands and feet were moving with the beat and her own steps before he noticed.

“Ah?” He squawked, and she laughed, twirling outwards with a flair, then came back to his arms.

“I believe I heard you were a talented dancer, and I think we both deserve a spin around the floor!” She laughed wildly, almost manic, a few curls slipping loose from her hair as she tossed her head back. Donald stumbled, caught himself, and caught Morgana as she fell into a slight dip.

“I have to get back home, I don’t really have time-” she shushed him.

“You look like you need a break. He’s not going to get caught tonight,” she pointed out, and gripped his hands tighter as a warning when he tried to tug away.

And, well. She had a point, he supposed. The same point Bentina had been hinting at earlier when she told him to go with the kids. The kids that were perfectly safe at the Manor, that certainly didn’t need him to rush home. So he sighed, took a breath, and let himself relax into the music.

Step and step, faster now, heels bouncing and only just brushing the floor, spin, step step, twirl and dip. Morgana was an energetic dancer, laughing and tossing her wide purple skirt around her. Donald couldn't help it, he laughed too, and tossed his partner in the air.

The songs changed, got faster, slower, faster again. Donald switched partners, once, twice, the robin flushed and grinning, the eagle with a challenging smirk. Donald cut through the crowd with ease and tossed the man as well, mostly for the hilarity of it, and caught him just as easily. It was worth the smirk fading to surprise, marked with a blush. Donald smiled, and they spun towards new partners.

He should stop. Get a drink of water, go home. To his quiet boat, and his dark hammock, and to the piles of notes still to sort through.

But Morgana had a point; he was unlikely to find something tonight. He was, he admitted to himself, the least likely of the team on the case to catch the Blot anyway. So just for tonight, for these few moments, he let himself forget about everything waiting at home and enjoy the music.

His latest partner begged off the floor to head towards the bar. Donald turned to look for a new dancer, and found himself looking straight into blue eyes framed by white feather curls. He froze, blasted years into the past, and wondered, for one wild moment, if he had time traveled.

"Donald? I thought that was you!" Daisy exclaimed, tugging his hands towards her until she could reach his shoulders for a tight hug. Donald returned it, then pulled back. Closer now, he could see fine lines around Daisy's eyes, and she was wearing her hair much longer than in college, pulled back with a headband and bow. She looked beautiful.

“Nice to see you,” he said, probably too quietly, given where they were, but Daisy had never had trouble understanding him, and she merely nodded, imperiously.

“Not that I’m not pleased, but I am surprised. Do you… still come here?” She asked, trailing into awkwardness, one hand rubbing her arm once before she dropped it. Donald shook his head, using her grip on his hands to pull them off to the side.

“Nah, not in years. I got an invite from a… friend, and she insisted I stay and take the night off.” He gestured vaguely at the floor, but he couldn’t see Morgana anymore. She was a tall woman, but the dance hall had gotten more crowded, it would be easy to miss her.

“Insisted, huh?” Daisy asked, crossing her arms and giving him a raised eyebrow. “I seem to remember it being hard to stop you taking the night off.” She said it in a teasing manner, and Donald wanted to laugh, he really did, but…

But. He sighed instead.

“This one is a bit more serious than skipping a study session or two,” he said, too serious and too morose, but it was already out there. Daisy frowned, looking at him again. For a moment, they stood there in silence, pressed in by so many people and yet feeling like a bubble surrounded them.

“Well.” Daisy said, lips pursed. “Well.” She glanced at the door to the club, then back to Donald with a determined glint to her eyes.

“I beat my date here, so I’ll need a dance partner until he gets here,”

she declared, and they were back out before Donald could think to protest. Despite himself, he laughed; Daisy had always led the way for them, never content to go slow. He fell into step with her like they had never been apart.

Daisy fell backwards, and he caught her in a dip, then a spin, and a toss, her heels clacking in the air and curls flying around her head. They were back to back, and then they were apart, spinning away and back, an orbital movement where they didn't touch, a double dip supporting each other's backs with one arm and clutching their partner with the opposite. Dancing with Daisy was always frantic, wild and fast; they were face to face, Daisy grinning wildly, and she was gone, back to him, twirling and spinning around each other over the floor. If there were other dancers in their way Donald didn't notice, and if they missed a step because the music had changed in the last two decades neither of them were bothered.

"Where's your date? I seem to remember you not tolerating tardiness," Donald quipped during a lull, Daisy close and their kicks matched. Daisy snorted.

"He said he would be late, I decided to leave anyway," she said, a fond grumble. A far cry from the burning rage that Donald remembered from his own experiences.

"Are you still dating Dapper, or is this someone new?" He asked, too curious for his own good. Daisy smiled, eyes glittering and a bit distant.

"Yes, the same old Dapper. It's been on and off, we're both so busy," she paused, sheepish, but Donald only nodded encouragingly. He loved Daisy, he really did, but it wasn't the romance of their youth. It had long simmered down to a close friendship, no matter that they hadn't seen each other in person in years (that was true of many of Donald's old friends, honestly).

“Anyway, he had a creative meeting with some designers at the magazine, he’s working for Marie Cluck now, did you know? And texted me that he would be running late tonight. That being said,” and she paused to let Donald spin her around him, hands neatly in front of her.

“I am glad I came early,; I might have missed you otherwise,” she finished, just slightly out of breath, and Donald nodded in agreement. He was about to say something else when he heard a triumphant shout, just audible over the music and chatter.

“I *knew* it!”

It was only long practice and Daisy’s hands braced on his shoulders for a hop that kept him from stopping entirely to sigh.

One night off, apparently, was too much to ask for.

“Donald?”

“Don’t look now,” he muttered, fighting a heady mix of annoyance and fond nostalgia, “but it seems my kids followed me here.” She glanced at the entrance, but they were truly surrounded by the crowd, so there wasn’t much to see. He was fairly certain the voice had come from one of the balconies anyway.

Daisy chuckled.

“Remember when the girls followed us to the carnival? They thought

they were so subtle, hiding behind those fake mustaches," she replied, a smile pulling at her mouth. Donald snorted, remembering. They had still been wearing their matching bows, the whole thing had been ridiculously cute.

"At least we were actually dating that time," he said while shaking his head, "they already thought I was on a date tonight, I'm going to have a fight on my hands convincing them otherwise." Daisy shrugged, clearly unbothered. Which was fair, it was Donald's problem, but also rude.

"You'll just have to break the tragic news," she sighed, dramatically, an off-timed dip nearly dragging Donald down with her while she pretended to faint backwards. He rolled his eyes.

"Suddenly wishing I had gone home," he muttered, but let Daisy tug him back into the dance. He would have to deal with the kids regardless, why worry about it?

Sure, he was distractedly wondering how they'd gotten there, how long they had been in the club, who had let them *inside* an adult's dance club, and so on, but he was trying to take a night off of worrying.

"Well, as I live and breathe! Donald, how good to see you old sport!" A hand clapped his shoulder; Dapper's charming smile caught his eye as he turned. Daisy tossed herself into the other duck's arms, a kiss to each cheek.

"Nice to see you Dapper; how're things?" Donald asked politely, stepping to the side so they could leave the dance floor. Dapper smiled widely, holding Daisy in his arms tightly. He was dressed smartly, he always was, and Donald waited for the rush of jealousy that used to come with their every interaction; they looked so similar, but

somehow the duck in front of him always made things work in a way that Donald couldn't.

The feeling didn't come; just a familiarity and a small amount of affection; he had never disliked the other man after all, just wished he could have what Dapper had managed with ease.

"Ah good, good! Doing very well, thank you! I hear you've had a few kids now, eh?" Donald laughed, nodded, leaning against the empty bar table they had settled by.

"Yeah, at least one of which is spying on us. Fair warning," he told him. Dapper glanced around, and then up.

"Ah… little lady in a pink bow? And a lad in a blue shirt?" Webby and Dewey. Donald couldn't say he was surprised.

"That's two of them. They're pretty sure I came to steal Daisy off into the night, I think," he revealed with a grin, and Dapper laughed, loud and bright. Daisy leaned against him, smiling.

"Well then! I would hate to have to fight you, but for the fair lady?" He leaned back against Daisy's shoulder, "I may have to!" Daisy rolled her eyes at him, but she seemed pleased by the attention nonetheless.

"I'm going to grab us drinks," she told them, and left before either man could reply. Dapper sighed dreamily after her. Donald shook his head with an amused scoff. He knew that feeling all too well.

"You know, I was never into swing dancing," Dapper said casually after a moment, leaning back against the table. Donald watched him

from the corner of his eye.

“Ballroom, now that was where I was! Formal, elegant, none of these flips and kicks!” He smiled at Donald. “But Daisy used to just gush about meeting you here, how much fun you used to have. I could never tell if she was trying to make me jealous, or if I was a rebound. But, well, I realized I could at least learn how to dance like she loved to do.” Donald continued to watch him, wondering where this was going. He hadn’t seen Dapper in years, they didn’t have a ‘confiding in’ kind of relationship.

“I was rather jealous of you;,” he admitted, and Donald choked on his spit. “Daisy was always full of complaints, about fights and break-ups and make-ups with you, but she was always so fond, like she couldn’t help but to love you. So passionate…” Dapper trailed off. Donald snorted, shaking his head.

“That kind of passion isn’t a good thing, long-term,” he said dismissively, "I told you that then, too.” He’d said a lot more than that, in truth, when Dapper had approached him, wanting to know if he and Daisy were truly broken up this time, if he thought Dapper had a chance at all.

“Yes, you did. And I appreciated that advice then, and I do now. But seeing you two dancing just now… It reminded me of all of that. You two have always been a fantastic couple on the dance floor.”

Donald turned to face Dapper entirely, who had a somber expression on his face.

“And you both make a great couple outside of it. Besides, like you said, you can learn to dance,” Donald said earnestly, and Dapper’s face cleared, split by another beaming grin.

“Well, I can try at least! Can’t imagine I’ll get to your level, but I think I can be a satisfactory dance partner.”

“I certainly think so,” Daisy added, sliding up to the table with three drinks in hand. Dapper took his, but his eyes never left Daisy. Donald grinned at them both.

“Well, I appreciate the drink, but I think I should let you get to your date and find where my kids got to. Lord knows how they even got here,” Donald said, slipping away as smoothly as possible. They both waved him goodbye, but they were looking at each other.

Twitterpated, completely twitterpated. He wondered if they planned on ever getting married; he’d like to see what kind of wedding the two would put together.

On the second floor, he found only a handful of couples, sipping at drinks and utterly absorbed in their partners, and a small cluster of ducklings near one of the railings overlooking the dance floor. He walked up, quietly, ears pricked.

“No, she’s still there talking to that other guy, maybe you were wrong?” Huey was saying, looking down at the crowd with a frown. Webby shook her head frantically.

“You saw them! The *passion,* the *romance,* who else could Uncle Donald be dating?”

Donald had to shove down the small burst of affection at her calling him Uncle Donald.

“Huh, that post is really blowing up,” Louie muttered, clearly not listening to the argument above him, while Dewey stared at the floor, ignoring them all, entranced by the dancing crowd.

Dewey loved to dance, to move, anything to look cool and get people’s attention, but he’d never been interested in dance lessons, not the kind that Donald could provide. He’d tried, and he’d gotten bored, and anything that required a partner was a no-go when the options were lame Uncle Donald or his two disinterested brothers. But he always loved to watch.

“Um, where did Unca Donald go?” Huey asked, and all four kids froze. Donald crossed his arms, and waited as they slowly turned to look at him in unison, eyes wide.

He wanted to yell. He really wanted to yell, to rage and scream and demand answers; why were they here, why were they out so late, don’t they know that Duckburg is dangerous at night? (Don’t they know that a terrorist was loose? But they can’t know that, of course they don’t.)

But he didn’t. Something washed over him; it wasn’t calm, exactly, just a cooling feeling. He’d been enjoying his evening, he’d had fun, and something in him wasn’t willing to ruin it by making a scene.

Some part of him was unwilling to ruin this place, with Dewey’s fascinated stares at the dancers and Daisy’s bright laughter.

So he breathed, harsh but slow, out his nose and took a sip of his drink, some fruity thing that he was sure would get him very drunk if he wasn’t careful. He took a sip, and waited, while four pairs of eyes watched him closely. His silence seemed to make the boys in

particular nervous; they glanced at each other rapidly, never letting their gaze linger long before it snapped back to him.

Unsurprisingly, it was Huey that broke first.

“Hiiii Uncle Donald! We were just- you see, um, we just wanted to-”

“Wanted to see the place from all your photos of Miss Daisy!” Webby interjects, hands waving in front of her as though to draw attention away from Huey. Donald let an eyebrow rise, slowly.

“Really?” He asked, mild. Webby nodded, frantic, with the boys voicing their agreement.

“So the fact that I was here tonight to meet with a friend is a complete coincidence?” He asked. It wasn’t really a question. They didn’t give him an answer.

“Just a friend, huh?” Dewey asked, one hand on his chin and a suspicious glint in his eyes. “Sure looked like she was more than a friend...” Donald gave Dewey a long look.

“Daisy is a friend, yes. And she isn’t who I was meeting tonight,” he said bluntly. Dewey’s doubtful expression melted off his face, replaced with confusion.

“Wait, you weren’t?” He asked, before laughing awkwardly.

“I mean, nice try Unca Donald! You’re just trying to throw us off the

scent!”

Pressure built behind Donald’s eyes and throbbed. He rubbed his face, then tossed back the rest of his drink so he could set the glass down somewhere.

“I was meeting Morgana Macawber, who I used to work with, because I wanted her insight on a work project,” Donald said slowly, clearly, and glanced down at the dance floor. If she was still in the building, he could no longer see her, and he didn’t really want to inflict his kids on her anyway.

The four looked at each other, clearly dubious, but Donald cut them off, not willing to continue debating his love life (or complete lack thereof) with his kids.

“How did you even know to come here? For that matter, how did you *get* here?”

“We took the bus,” Louie offered, eyes still on his phone. He seemed the least interested in the situation, which was a surprise. Usually he would be the one trying to get them all out of trouble. Whatever he was looking at had to be pretty engrossing; some new Tweeter drama, maybe?

Then his words actually registered.

“The bus.” Donald said. Four nods.

“The bus that doesn’t run anywhere near the Manor after 8:30?” Four frozen faces, then one pale-faced nod from Huey.

“So, did you have a *plan* on how to get home, or were you just going to wing it?” No response.

Donald sighed, long and slow, and let his head drop into his hands.

Jump in the Line

The kids did apparently think to tell Bentina they were going to the park for some ghost hunting adventure, so at least the adults at the Manor weren't going mad looking for them.

Of course, that meant that once again, Donald had to be the one to ruin it. He would get to bring the kids home, insist on them being grounded, wait for this to, somehow, be his fault. For not convincing them better to stay home, for being so boring that him going out after work is monumental enough that they insisted on trailing him here, for not just letting it go and letting them have fun-

"You're going to make me stress molt," Donald gritted out, sitting down at a table while his kids, his nosy, infuriating, wonderful kids, gingerly took seats around him. A server popped up the moment they settled, taking drink orders for Pep and a rum and coke, because Donald was still having his night off, and it was early enough for one more drink.

Just one though; kids needed to be in bed soon, and it seemed Donald was now their ride home.

"We were just curious," Dewey grumbled into his cup. "You *never* go out anywhere on a date." Donald resisted the urge to slam his face into the table.

"Not a date. And how does that make it better? Besides, this is the first time there's been someone to watch you for this long that I trust," he pointed out, tapping his fingers on the table. The boys winced; he didn't know what they were thinking of, but he certainly remembered the boat explosion.

“Spying on people is still rude and invasive, no matter *what* your reasons were,” Donald bit out, and then stopped, feeling déjà vu hit him like a brick. He’d had this talk before with Daisy’s nieces, and he was pretty sure with Max as well. Sort of, Max hadn’t actually followed his dad, but he’d been distressed at the idea of Goofy going anywhere with someone.

His boys look chagrined, but he doesn’t think for a moment that they’re convinced.

“But…” Webby says, looking lost, and a bit heartbroken, “we said no more family secrets. And it really looked like you were on a date. We just wanted to *know*. ”

And Webby had grown up in a house where if she wanted to know anything, she had to look for herself, because Scrooge wasn’t talking and her grandmother… well, who knew with Bentina. She had been devoted to Webby’s care, loved and protected her, but Donald hadn’t gotten the impression she was forthcoming with secrets. Not the ones that mattered, anyway.

Dewey had told him that there had been no proof of Della’s existence, until he had given Webby a photo from their shared 17th birthday. Bentina had known Della; if Webby knew nothing, it was because nobody was talking. And his boys, well. They’d shown their own concerns about secrets.

“I can’t promise I won’t ever have secrets,” Donald said, slowly, feeling years older and sadder all at once. “We all have a right to privacy, and there are things in my past I don’t like talking about, that you kids don’t need to know.” That got him four alert gazes, fearful and angry and confused.

“But I will never lie to you, that I promise. If you ask me something, I

will tell you the truth, even if that truth is that I don't want to talk about it. Okay?" Long silence, The boys looked at each other, beaks twisted and unhappy. Webby only looked at him, scanning his eyes like there was some code she needed to break. Finally she nodded, and slumped down in her seat.

"It was bad that we followed you, wasn't it? Cause you wanted a night to yourself," she mumbled. Donald sighed, leaning forward to ruffle her hair.

"It was not good, because you shouldn't follow people just for curiosity, and because it's late and you had no way to get home," he said, and then let out a longer, more dramatic sigh.

"Buuuut, just this once," he said slowly, dragging out each syllable until he had their rapt attention, "I suppose I can let it go."

"What." Louie, who had been entirely silent for the majority of the conversation, tuned back in with a deadpan stare. Donald stared back, one eyebrow raised.

"No grounding for sneaking out late?"

"Technically you have permission to be *out* , just not here. And you would have needed a ride home anyway," Donald pointed out, feeling a grin pull at the corner of his mouth.

"What about for following you?" Huey piped up.

"So long as we're clear on why that isn't happening again, it's not something I'm going to ground you for."

“What about prying into all your secrets cause you never tell us *anything!”* Dewey spat out accusingly, pointing at Donald like he was on trial. Donald felt the smile run off of his face.

“I told you I wouldn’t lie if you asked me something,” he said pointedly, but as calm as he could manage, “You haven’t asked me anything.”

And that was met with four blank stares, before a furious whispered debate began. Donald took another sip of his drink, and felt his phone go off.

It was from Mickey, which was a surprise on its own. Donald winced, recalling that he had talked about going to visit L.A. with the kids and had yet to get to it. He opened the message.

Mickey: are you still at the old dance hall? minnie and I are in town and thought we’d swing by!

Donald: that pun was atrocious

Donald: and yes, I am. Daisy is here with Dapper too, but I don’t know for how long

Donald: wait how did you know that

“How did you meet Daisy!” Webby demanded, in a triumphant voice, dragging his eyes away from the screen with a start. Donald had the feeling that she had won some kind of debate.

“Here, actually, a few months before I shipped out with the Navy,” Donald replied absently as he put his phone away. “We got along great, sent letters while I was deployed, and dated for a while when I got back to Duckburg. But we got along better when I was an ocean away.”

Webby looked disappointed, but more convinced than she had the last time she had asked. Donald hoped that was the end of it; the last thing he wanted to do was get mini matchmakers trying to get him and Daisy back together.

Again.

“Who were you meeting with, if it wasn’t her?” Huey asked next.

“An old coworker, Morgana. I think she left already, but I’ll introduce you if I spot her,” Donald repeated, and Huey frowned, clearly still curious.

“Hey pal! Room for two more?” Donald blinked, because he had seen Huey’s beak open, but that-

He turned in his seat, and felt his face break into a broad grin.

“Mick!”

Mickey Mouse, dressed in red slacks and a broad grin, waved wildly from the top of the stairs. Behind him, Minnie waved as well, a pink skirt swirling around her. There were whispers surrounding them, but

Mickey was an old hand at it and strode over with ease, and pulled Donald into a back breaking hug. Small though the mouse was, he was *strong*.

"Good to see you pal! Man, it's been a while!" Donald laughed, and if it sounded a bit wet, well, Minnie was the only one that could see his face. "I didn't think you'd be here that fast!"

It had only been weeks since their last jaunt to Kingdom Hearts; it had been years since they had seen each other outside a battlefield.

Minnie's hug was even tighter; he hadn't seen *her* in person since she had moved in with Mickey.

Moved in was perhaps not the best way of putting it; followed him on a wing and a prayer from the Kingdom Hearts dimension would be more accurate. Donald had gone hoarse from yelling at the two for not planning how they would make anything work, before he had grudgingly, willingly, put all the paperwork together to make Minnie a U.S. citizen. Wasn't the first time he had done it, and it hadn't been the last.

"It's good to see you both," Donald said cheerfully, swallowing any stray tears like they had never happened. One of the benefits of a voice like his, few people could tell if he was choked up.

"Now, who're these little guys? They can't be your kids Don, they're way too cute for that!" Mickey teased, leaning forward to grin at the boys. Donald could almost see the stars in their eyes, and bit down a grumble at the insult with a scoff.

"These are my kids; Huey, Dewey, Louie and Webby," he said, gesturing to each as he spoke, and smiled softly when Webby lit up at

her inclusion. It seemed to delight her every time, no matter how often he said it.

"Kids, this is Mickey and Minnie Mouse, they're old friends of mine and, apparently, in town for…?" he trailed off, the full situation catching back up to him.

"How long *are* you in town for? And how did you even know I was here tonight?" Of all nights, because really, Donald didn't *go* out.

Mickey opened his mouth to answer, but that was the point that the kids woke up and started 'asking' (yelling) questions. Mickey started answering, but Donald was amused to see that he was struggling to keep up with the four way interrogation.

"One of your boys was posting about you all being at a 'fancy dancing hall place,' and Mickey recognized the photos," Minnie whispered with an amused smile, watching her husband's eyes dart around, trying to keep up.

Louie, probably, which explained his preoccupation with his phone. It might explain the crowd, too; it had been a while since Donald had been here, but the dance hall generally wasn't this busy on a weekday night. Hopefully the extra business wouldn't draw any Duckburg-style crazy. He didn't feel like fighting the Beagle Boys tonight.

He knocked on the table as soon as the thought crossed his mind; Mickey glanced at his hand and grinned.

"You guys went to school together, seriously? How were you even friends?" Dewey asked, no tact as per usual, and his siblings all winced. Mickey leaned back in his pilfered chair, gazing into the middle distance.

“We were both in theatre together! Donald was usually on set building, but he was fantastic at swordplay! Didn’t get to go on stage much, but he helped everyone rehearse,” he reminisced, while Donald rolled his eyes.

“We met because he was getting picked on and I broke Pete’s nose for him,” Donald clarified. Dewey’s eyes settled on him with a manic glint.

“You were in *theatre* !” He all but wailed. “With Mickey Mouse! How is this the first time I’m hearing about this?” Donald stared at him.

“I told you this. There’s photos of me in costume in the houseboat?” He said, baffled. Huey looked up at this, from where he had been… yes, taking notes.

“That photo of you in a tunic? What play was that?”

“The Three Musketeers. I think Grandma Duck took that photo,” Donald replied, thinking back. Living with Scrooge had left him little time for other hobbies until he was old enough to refuse to go, but Elvira had supported every short lived pastime, showing up to every play and showcase.

It had made up for the many times that Scrooge and Della had been elsewhere, on adventures or caught up with their own lives.

“Is there any video of you on stage?” Louie asked. Casually. Donald's eyes narrowed.

“Probably not; they didn’t always record shows back then, and even if they did, nobody in our family would have bought a copy,” he answered suspiciously.

“What, Uncle Scrooge didn’t just sneak his own camera in?” Louie snorted, and the other kids laughed. Donald met Mickey’s gaze over the table, and bit his tongue. Mickey looked… well, like he always did when Scrooge was mentioned, honestly. Disappointed, mostly. Angry. Mickey had never really cared for Scrooge, and only good manners kept him from voicing particulars.

“Not sure if he made it to that one, and I didn’t always go on stage,” Donald finally said neutrally, and left it at that. The conversation (interrogation, really) continued, and it was clear that all of the kids had been thinking about what to ask Mickey for a while.

Probably since they had found Donald knew him.

“This is the coolest thing ever. We’re talking with *the* Mickey and Minnie Mouse,” Dewey hissed to himself, staring at Mickey like he thought the mouse would vanish if he so much as blinked. Huey had already gone through two pages of notes, Donald had no idea what he had written. Webby had just asked where Walt Disney’s head was.

“Min, want to dance? I think the kids would like to be alone with their new idol,” Donald offered, half in jest, but Minnie’s eyes lit up like fireworks, so Donald wasted no time in moving back towards the floor and leaving Mickey with the kids before any of them could think to protest.

Sure, it was a bit mean leaving Mickey entirely on his own with the terrors. And yes, Mickey was likely going to get revenge by telling embarrassing high school stories. But Donald was giving himself one night without worrying about those things, so he twirled Minnie onto

the dance floor and ignored the worries with a shaky breath.

Besides, the key to dealing with embarrassing stories was to laugh them off. That way nobody knew they could hurt you. It was a lesson that Donald had had many opportunities to learn, over the years.

Minnie smiled at him, tail twirling behind her, and he focused on her instead of his thoughts. It was rude to think about something other than your dance partner, after all.

At some point the night passed from ‘a drink after work’ late into ‘going to work late tomorrow’ late. Donald called it before it got to ‘calling in sick to work’ levels despite not having an office day tomorrow; the kids needed sleep, he needed sleep, and Mickey and Minnie had things going on that had led them to coming to Duckburg besides meeting him.

He’d asked, when they had a moment, what was going on, but Mickey had only laughed and said it was for a new film that he couldn’t talk about yet. Nothing to worry about, but he confessed that they would have to postpone their vaguely planned trip until his schedule cleared up. Donald could certainly relate.

He quietly passed along the news about the Blot’s escape. Mickey froze, and Minnie shuddered, but they both nodded and promised to keep their heads low. Neither Mickey or Minnie were known magic users, they would be fine.

They would both be fine.

The crowded dance hall was loud, chaotic, but it seemed most people

there were truly there to dance, not to gawk at Mickey Mouse. Probably helped that Louie hadn't posted the name of the place; like Mickey, anyone that had come had to have recognized the photos that Louie had posted. Or maybe the bouncer was working overtime keeping out the riffraff, who knew. The bouncer, a beefy tiger in a dark suit, eyed the kids as Donald led them out. Donald eyed him back; *Donald* wasn't the one that missed four children sneaking in, this wasn't on him.

Come to think of it, why hadn't the servers said anything...? Had the rules changed in the last few years?

Mickey had given all of the kids his phone number, and the way that Dewey was staring at his phone was pure gold. Donald had seen him look at actual treasure with less wonder in his eyes. He'd gotten a cheery wave and wink from Daisy and Dapper as they left, but hadn't had a chance to chat again. Pity, he thought that Webby and Daisy would get along, but maybe it was for the best.

He was smiling as he loaded up the boys in the backseat, Webby snuggled into the front. Huey was already asleep, leaning against the door, with Louie drowsily settled against his shoulder. Dewey was only just hanging onto consciousness, muttering about this all being a dream. Donald chuckled, glanced at his phone to confirm it was only an email, then left the club, whistling softly.

Damn it all, Morgana had been right. He was feeling completely refreshed and calm after a night off, even if the source of his anxiety was looming just over the horizon with tomorrow's sunrise.

Bentina met him at the front door, taking Webby into her arms with a soft smile, then scooping up Huey before he could fall out of the car. Donald gratefully took the other two, thinking about when, once upon a time, he could have held all three of them in his arms at once with no issue.

“I thought they were ghost hunting,” Bentina murmured as they settled the boys into bed. Donald paused, tucking Dewey in.

“The buses don’t run by the Manor this late, “ he answered finally, “They showed up at the club for a ride home.” She glanced at him, dubious.

“Just for that?” She asked, and yeah, she had raised Webby, clearly she knew her granddaughter’s tendencies. Still, Donald just shrugged.

“I mean, they were definitely curious about what I was up to,” he conceded, and didn’t continue. Bentina dropped it, though Donald was betting that she would be asking Webby about it in the morning.

“Did you enjoy your evening?” She did ask, once all the kids were in bed and they had reached the kitchen. Scrooge and Della were nowhere to be found, but a kettle was hot on the stove.

“Yeah, ran into a couple old friends,” he replied, leaning against the counter. Bentina went to make them both tea.

“I saw; Launchpad mentioned something on Tweeter about a Mickey Mouse?” Donald snorted.

“Yeah, he was in town apparently; surprised that Launchpad cared. Is he around?” Bentina shared a chuckle, then shook her head.

“Oh, I suppose it may have been something Gosalyn sent him. And he left a few hours ago to see Mr. Mallard.”

“Good thing you were able to pick up the children,” she added mildly, glancing up at him over the rim of her cup. Donald nodded blandly, and she eventually shook her head again and looked away.

The kitchen fell into silence. Donald wouldn’t say it was tense, exactly. Expectant, maybe. They both knew that come tomorrow they would be back to work, hunting down fugitives and rooting out FOWL bases to burn. But it wasn’t something they talked about at the Manor.

Some part of it was practical, too many people to keep track of to discuss secrets in this house. But some part of Donald wondered if Bentina liked to leave Agent 22 at work, and just be Mrs. Beakley here.

Certainly Donald liked to leave his various hats and uniforms at the door. He’d like to leave his anxieties there too, but he’d never had much luck with that.

The clack of a cane and the clunk of a metal foot against the floor warned that their solitude was about to be interrupted. Donald finished his tea with a small sigh. Bentina set her saucer on the table.

“Beakley! We’ve got a new treasure map that leads to- ah, Donald,” Scrooge all but stuttered, stopping in the doorway. There was a muffled shout as Della crashed into his back, and they both went tumbling into the room. Donald muffled a snort into his empty teacup and moved to help.

Della took his hand up with a grin, but Scrooge waved him off, using the table to haul himself up.

“I assume you were about to tell me you’re going off on another adventure?” Bentina asked calmly, from where she was still seated at the table. Scrooge blinked at her, before he recovered and nodded vigorously.

“Yes, exactly! We’ve discovered a map that will lead us to the resting place of a great and powerful witch! She was buried with her magic staff, a powerful relic that-” and he paused so abruptly that Donald glanced around the room for the distraction. Nothing was amiss though, and he turned back to Scrooge with a frown.

“Ach, I’ve gotten used to one of the kids interrupting me at this point,” he said sheepishly. Donald laughed quietly.

Della settled next to him at the counter, bumping their shoulders together, and for a moment, he was blasted years in the past, when it was just the two of them and their uncle. Things had been so simple back then.

But Della’s prosthetic caught the light, and Donald could feel his knee ache, and shook off the nostalgia.

“Er, well. Plenty of time to go over the plan when the kids are up and about,” Scrooge continued awkwardly, sitting across from Bentina with so much tension Donald would have thought him negotiating with someone over a contract.

“How was your evening?” Scrooge asked, looking straight at Donald. Donald choked, staring back in surprise.

“Ah, it was fine? I got to see a few old friends, kick my heels a few times,” he said vaguely, feeling on the spot and entirely unprepared for it. Della leaned against him.

“Oh? Anyone I know?” Donald glanced at her, then back at Bentina for some hint, but she looked back at him with only an eyebrow raised, so he was getting no help from that corner.

“Daisy and Dapper, then Mick and Minnie showed up for a bit,” he said, skipping Morgana entirely. There was a chance Scrooge would recognize her name, and he didn’t want to answer questions about how they knew each other.

“That’s… Daisy is your ex, right?” Della asked slowly, chewing over her words as she spoke. Donald nodded, still feeling wrong-footed.

“It’s nice that you stayed friends!” Della replied brightly, but there was something in her eyes that Donald was dubious about.

“And Mickey, wow! It’s been a while since I saw him! Hey, you should invite him over! Him and… Minnie, right? It would be great to catch up!” Della exclaimed cheerfully. Donald glanced at Scrooge out of the corner of his eye. Somehow, he doubted that Scrooge would second that invitation.

“Not sure how long Mick is in town, Della. I’ll ask if he’ll be free, but I wouldn’t hold my breath,” he answered, and she rolled her eyes.

“Sure, sure, it’s definitely not because you want to keep your friends away from your super cool moon sister,” she said dismissively, waving a hand. Donald scowled, leaning away.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Della snorted a loud laugh.

“Aw come on Don, you were always keeping me from meeting your friends! I mean, it was kinda obvious you didn’t want me stealing them away with cool adventures or something. But that was back in school, it’s kinda silly to get hung up on now, right?” She elbowed him with another grin. He shoved her arm away.

“That isn’t what happened,” he growled, feeling hot. “I’m not worried you’re going to *steal* my friends! How old are you?” But she smirked like she always did, like she knew something he didn’t, and from the table Scrooge let out a laugh.

“I seem to remember you trying to keep your little friends far and away from your sister back in the day,” Scrooge offered from his seat, and Donald spared him an annoyed look.

“You’re both delusional,” he snapped, and shoved his way towards the door. He wanted out, out of this room, out of this house. His neck was burning, and he wanted this shirt *off*.

Della tried to catch his arm, smirk still on her face.

“Hey, I’m just teasing. I wouldn’t do that-”

He threw her hand off of him. His face felt like fire, he was probably bright red, and only the fact that it was Bentina’s kitchen was keeping him from throwing his fist through a wall.

“I have more faith in my friends than *that,* ” he snapped, and started back towards the door.

“Then what’s your *problem?* ” Della snarled back, losing her smug look to a scowl. Donald didn’t bother replying, and went to the door.

“Come on Donald, what is with you?” She shouted after him, and Scrooge was saying something too, but Donald was beyond hearing either of them, and they didn’t make an effort to follow.

The boat rocked as he stomped onboard, and the movement drew him back to his own head, clenching the outer railing with white knuckles and wood beginning to splinter under his hands.

He forced his hands to relax, one and then the other, taking harsh breaths on a count until they smoothed out, then groaned and let his head drop.

He didn’t know why he even bothered.

Doppelgangers

Donald left early, taking the time to get some coffee at a shop and sit in the breakroom to answer emails. He had an office, but he liked the mild distraction of other agents walking by.

He wanted any distraction he could get. The night had been *fun,* but all he could think about was how it had ended. It gave everything a sour note.

Mickey had texted the night before to confirm they had made it back to their hotel safely, and then again this morning that they had survived to get to his work meeting on time. Daisy had sent a smiley face to him without prompting very early this morning; he didn't know if she was letting him know she was also home safe, or if she was just confirming that it was still his number, but he replied with a different face and smiled to himself. He'd missed her.

He missed a lot of people.

The clock chimed, and it was time to meet his trainees, to go over their upcoming mission. The mission was essentially a graduation test. He felt like they had largely covered everything they could from a classroom, and had given the OK to Ravenson to put them in the field. She'd come back with a group infiltration mission that she clearly had planned out in advance for a potential test mission. Either that, or they really were short on agents, because they needed a lot of hands on it, and if his trainees hadn't been ready…

It was a concern, for sure.

For once, they didn't have an assignment to break into the classroom, so he felt safe enough walking in while still distracted by his thoughts.

“Sir, there was someone who looked a lot like you at the old dance hall last night,” 720 told him cautiously, quietly, as he walked into the classroom the next morning. She was holding out her phone. Donald glanced at it, going through options rapidly in his mind.

Then he actually processed what was on screen, and had to chuckle.

“Oh, I know him actually, Dapper Duck. He works in fashion, a magazine I think. Dating a designer, that’s her he’s dancing with,” he said casually, looking at the photo of Daisy and Dapper twirling around. They looked good. In the background, too blurry for anyone else to identify, he could see four small white blobs on the balcony.

720 peered at him, then back at her screen.

“Huh,” she said, “The resemblance is uncanny.”

“You’re telling me!” Donald laughed, then considered.

“Class, new plan for the morning. Partner up and find at least one doppelganger on social media for your partner. I don’t care if they’re famous or not, just see who you can dig up,” he called out, and everyone in the room snapped to attention.

“Why?” T86 asked, but she was already pulling out her phone as she did so, as were most of the other class members.

“A, because I want to show you how easy it is to mistake people, especially people whose species doesn’t have distinctive markings. We

need to be confident that when we make an identification, it's correct, and that means being able to pick apart physical differences between people," he started, even though he was hoping nobody would look too closely at any pictures of *Donald* Duck and realize there was nothing to find.

"B, because knowing in advance if you can pass for another person is helpful if you're making an alibi on the fly," he continued, and 720's eyes lit up with interest.

"Have you ever pretended to be this Dapper Duck for a mission?" She asked eagerly. "You recognized him pretty quickly."

"Once or twice," he said honestly. He could imitate Dapper's voice reasonably well with his voice changer on, and it helped distance himself from his actual identity.

"What was the mission?" She asked, and now several pairs of eyes were on him again, screens down.

"Tell you what," he replied, "I'll tell you a few mission stories after you've finished your assignment."

That should give him enough time to find another cup of coffee at least. He was exhausted.

He ran into Agent C4 in the breakroom, and gave him a mild nod. The coffee was brewing, so he waited, tapping his fingers absently on the formica countertop.

C4 coughed into his fist.

“Agent DD. I’m glad I caught you. Your office was empty.”

Donald glanced at him. Come to think of it, what was C4 doing here? Wasn’t his main base in Houston?

“I’m not in it most days,” Donald replied, looking back at the coffee pot. “Unless someone sets a meeting up.”

“Ah. I don’t think this necessitates a meeting,” C4 said in an awkward tone. Maybe recalling their last meeting with Ravenson. Maybe he was just like that when he wasn’t blustering through a conversation.

“I will be proctoring your trainees next mission,” he continued. Donald looked back over, biting his tongue to keep the surprise off his face. C4 wasn’t involved with training, why would he be helping?

“How do you expect they’ll do?” C4 asked, when Donald didn’t react. He seemed to be looking for a specific response that Donald wasn’t giving him.

“I expect them to do well,” Donald replied evenly. “If I had any doubts about their abilities I wouldn’t have approved the mission.”

The mission in question was an undercover mission testing their abilities to infiltrate, gather information, and change plans on the fly if necessary. Nothing too dangerous, it was just a party, but it was essentially their last test. Barring any monumental errors, they all

would likely be moving out of training soon afterwards.

“No doubts at all? Besides Trainee 330, none of them have seen the field, even with a senior agent. None of them have been in the field alone at all,” C4 replied. His voice was just shy of smug.

“As I said. I have no doubts about their abilities, or I wouldn’t have approved the mission,” Donald repeated, and finally the coffee was done, so he could pour a cup and leave. C4 didn’t follow.

Back in the classroom, the trainees had gathered up a few laptops, a pile of phones and notepads, and seemed to be voting as a group on various matches. Donald took a moment to observe them, sipping his still-too-hot coffee.

“I still think his chin is too big,” K29 argued, gesturing towards the screen in front of them. The cat on the screen was a good likeness, throwing a peace sign towards the camera.

“Yeah, but we’re looking for ‘could pass as this person,’ not identical twins. And his markings are ridiculously close to yours,” T86 replied with a frown. Donald had to agree, the stripe patterns were visually very similar, even if he also agreed about the chin being different.

“Besides, you could always claim you were using a filter for that picture,” 330 pointed out, staring at his own screen with intent.

“Not gonna lie, this is a really fun way to check out new hairstyles,” 720 said under her breath, flipping through a few accounts in a row while squinting at K17. “If you ever want to try longer hair, I think it would suit you.”

K17 snorted a laugh.

Donald took the opportunity to step back into the room fully. Only a few of them looked up, engrossed in their task, but 330 grinned as he returned.

“Hey Double Duck, your twin works for Marie Cluck!” He called out, spinning his screen to display Dapper’s LinkedIn page. As usual, his photo was impeccable. Donald didn’t think he’d personally ever had a photo taken where he wasn’t blinking, or sneezing, or had a weird expression, or… well, something.

“Wait, I thought the twin guy we found was that guy with all the kids?” K17 asked, leaning over to squint at the page.

A thin curl of concern curled around his spine. He knew this was the risk of the topic, but on the other hand…

“That’s the band guy,” 330 replied. He pulled up another tab, and yup, that was Donald’s Tweeter page. “But I don’t think Double Duck could pass for him for long.”

“Wait, why not?”

In response, 330 hit play on a paused video, and Donald got the joy of listening to himself singing along to the music in all his squawky glory.

Several trainees winced. K17 let out a low whistle.

“Yeah… that’s gonna be hard to imitate for long.” He then tried, or at least Donald thought he was trying, to imitate Donald’s scratchy voice. It was odd to hear from someone else.

Another trainee made an attempt, and was even worse. Everyone was tuned in now, each making a bizarre choking sound in imitation of his voice.

It was hardly the first time Donald had had his voice made fun of, nor the first time that someone had tried to copy him with bizarre sounding results. He wasn’t really insulted, it wasn’t like they knew he was in the room.

It did make him very tempted to slide his voice changer off for a moment. So very, very tempted.

It would completely destroy the alibi that using the voice changer provided. What a shame.

“Alright, alright, back to work,” he said, and the trainees turned back to their screens with a few choking laughs.

“Sorry we couldn’t get you a second twin, DD,” 330 said with a grin, before he too turned back to his work.

“I think I’ll survive,” Donald chuckled, and sat down to work through his own work while the trainees collected various people. At times, he’d look up and help judge if someone was a close enough match as a tie breaker vote.

“Feel free to branch out. Mugshots are another option to look at,”

Donald suggested when a few people were still struggling. He didn't expect everyone to get stellar results, the point was more to get into the right mindset, but they seemed determined to find a match for everyone, and he was loath to stop them.

At noon though, he had to cut them off of the project.

"Alright everyone, we have a mission. Get your bags together, make whatever arrangements you need to, and meet back here at two. We'll go over the mission brief again on the plane, but the details have been sent to your emails if you want to go over them first. Hold any questions for the briefing, please."

The cheerful atmosphere dissolved into a serious and determined air, and the room quickly emptied.

Donald had to prepare too; he was joining them on their mission as a senior agent, and to have more feet on the ground. His bag was already packed and in his car, since the family had planned to go on another adventure soon, but unless Bentina had forgotten to let him know of their departure, they were still at the Manor.

Given the opportunity, he wanted to let the kids know he would be traveling before he left, instead of calling from the runway. Bentina would probably be fine with a text message, it wasn't like she didn't know there was a training mission.

Well, no time like the present. If he wanted to make it back in time, he would need to hurry. Things had a habit of getting complicated with his family.

First thing he found when he got home was that Dewey and Webby were apparently playing hide and seek, but the rules were that they couldn't hide in any rooms. He found this out by finding Dewey on the roof and nearly having a heart attack.

"I'm fine, Unca Donald! Look, there's a window right here!" Dewey shouted as soon as Donald pulled into the driveway, before he had a chance to do more than gasp out a startled breath. Dewey then took a foam bullet to the forehead and groaned, darting back into the house through the nearby window.

Donald darted inside, and found them both arguing in an abandoned storage room that had been Dewey's exit.

"Come on, you only found me cause Unca Donald came home!"

"I was already on your scent!" Webby insisted. "And there's no immunity for talking to an adult!"

"New rule," Donald wheezed as he got inside, leaning heavily against the wall, "immunity for letting Uncle Donald know you're safe."

Not that he'd never gotten onto the Manor roof before, but he'd at least been older!

Surely he hadn't been climbing out there at thirteen…?

Hmm.

“Fine,” Webby groaned, before she shyly peered at Donald, like she was checking his reaction to her displeasure. He breathed out his nose, then walked forward to ruffle both their heads. Dewey had his typical disgruntled reaction, leaning back to fix his hair, while Webby leaned in with a contented sigh.

“Wanted to let everyone know I have to fly off today,” he said apologetically. “Work needs me in Spain for a few days.”

“Spain?” Dewey asked.

“Why?” Webby continued. They spoke so fast that it sounded like a single sentence.

“Training seminar. They want me on site for this one. Nothing crazy,” he explained. The two of them glanced at each other, communicating silently, before they nodded.

“Will you call us when you land?” Dewey asked. Donald nodded, then hesitated.

“It’ll be very late when I land, for you guys,” he warned. Webby shrugged.

“We might be in Europe the same time as you,” Webby offered, “Our next adventure is in Switzerland. Oh! Maybe you could fly with us?”

Dewey lit up, but Donald winced.

“My flight is already paid for by work,” he told them apologetically, “and I’m flying with a few coworkers, so we’re planning on working for part of the flight. Maybe next time.”

She drooped, shoulders curling in.

“How about you come on our next adventure?” Dewey offered. Weby perked up a bit, and two pairs of big watery eyes met his. Donald pursed his beak.

“Let me know what the next one is, and I’ll see if I can get off work, okay? I need enough warning to take time off,” he said. Both of them nodded rapidly.

“We will! Promise!”

He tugged them both into a tight hug, reminded them to be safe if they were playing on the roof (“Nah, Webby knows now, so it’s a bad hiding spot.”), and moved on to find Huey.

It wasn’t a difficult trip, Huey was in the library doing research on something. Looked like naval ships, from what he could see of the pages, but Huey tossed his notebook casually over the books and hopped out of his seat when Donald appeared, so he couldn’t see anything.

“Unca Donald! You’re home early!” Huey greeted him with a hug. Donald squeezed back, wincing.

“I have to fly out for work,” he explained. “I wanted to say goodbye to everyone, since you all haven’t left yet for your adventure.”

Huey pulled back, peering at him.

“You didn’t mention having to travel again. Where are you going?” He asked suspiciously.

“Spain. I thought you would all be off to Switzerland the entire time I was off, but it sounds like you can’t leave just yet?” Donald replied. Huey took the distraction, but his expression made it pretty clear he knew he was being distracted.

“Uncle Scrooge says there’s a storm he wants to avoid, so he wanted to hold off flying out until this afternoon. I think he just got a last minute work meeting and wanted it out of the way,” Huey grumbled. Donald could relate; it wasn’t that the adventure was delayed, but the implication that Scrooge was lying just to make a quick buck (or small fortune, probably), that was annoying. He could at least tell the truth.

“Your mom must have agreed, if she didn’t insist on flying out anyway,” he pointed out, trying to keep the peace. Huey accepted it with a dubious shrug.

“Probably. So, you have work in Spain?”

“Yeah, training seminar that they want on-site,” Donald explained. This would have been more efficient if he’d gathered everyone together first, but oh well.

“Is that something that needs to happen a lot?”

“Probably not. My boss is keeping most of my work to stay in Duckburg, it was part of what I asked for when I took the job,” he answered. Huey looked relieved at that.

“They were okay with that?” He asked with interest.

“She offered it, actually, since I have you kids here,” Donald told him. “I don’t like being away too much.”

Huey’s face twisted a bit at that, like he was happy and troubled at once.

“What about when we’re gone all the time? On adventures, I mean.”

“That’s different,” Donald answered easily. “I’m your parent, I want to be here when you need me, or want to hang out. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want you to have other stuff going on.”

“But you miss us?” Huey pressed. Donald nodded.

“Sure, of course I do. I love spending time with you all. But that isn’t the same as not wanting you to go places,” Donald told him.

Huey considered that, then nodded decisively. Donald went in for another hug, which Huey cheerfully returned, before he moved on.

Louie was the easiest to locate; as with most days off, he was chilling in the living room with Ottoman Empire playing in the background. His eyes were glued to his phone, and his slump was pretty

unwelcoming.

That was, until he looked up and saw Donald, at which point he sat up entirely and set the phone away entirely.

“Unca Donald! Want to watch with me?”

Yes. Desperately. But…

“I can’t today,” he said regretfully. “I have to head out for a work trip. Wanted to talk to everyone before I had to get to the airport.”

Louie slumped back into the cushions. His hands shoved their way into his pockets.

“Oh. Anywhere cool?”

“Spain. I probably won’t get to go anywhere besides work though, work trips don’t usually give me time to do tourist stuff,” Donald explained, taking a seat next to him. He leaned back into the couch and carefully glanced at the clock. He had a bit more time before he had to be back.

“That’s boring,” Louie offered, not looking at him.

“It is,” Donald agreed. “Maybe we should take a vacation there instead. No adventure, just sightseeing.”

Louie sat up a little bit, still not looking at him directly.

“It’ll be hard to convince everyone to do something boring instead of a death-defying trip to the top of a mountain,” he pointed out. Donald shrugged.

“We can find a way,” he replied. “I bet everyone would come along if we just say we’re going, instead of asking first.”

Louie let out a reluctant giggle, and turned to look at him.

“You’ll be back when we get home? I guess we’re flying out later today,” he said, peering closely at him. Donald nodded.

“I should beat you home,” he answered. Louie relaxed, and leaned over until their shoulders were tight together. Donald shifted to give him a sideways hug. Louie snuggled tight against his side.

He watched a few minutes of the show, before he sighed and shifted to get up. Louie moved away reluctantly.

“You’ll call when you land?” He demanded.

“... Yeah, I’ll call. We’ll be in the same time zone at least,” he answered. It wasn’t quite accurate, since they were flying out later, but it should be close enough. He could at least leave a message for them to listen to when they landed. Or woke up, since it would be late by Duckburg time, and he hoped they slept for the flight.

Louie accepted that, leaning forward to get one last hug, before Donald finally left the room.

Scrooge was still at work, which meant that Launchpad was probably at the garage, and Bentina had been helping set up part of the trainee mission at the base, so he'd try to catch her there.

That left one person in the house. Donald hurried towards the door, hoping he didn't run into her. He'd been able to focus on work all day, avoiding the hurt and anger from the night before with long practice, and the last thing he wanted was the distraction of those emotions right before he went back to SHUSH.

"Donald!"

Aw phooey.

Interlude: Della - One Step Forward

Della's sleep schedule had always been chaotic, but after her return from the Moon it was entirely random. Sometimes she went days without sleeping, then survived off of naps for a while, then lost 29 hours straight. Uncle Scrooge helped when he could, being an early riser himself, and Bentina was often up late and game for a chat.

Donald, who had once been her go-to choice for those odd moments of sleeplessness, had been clear he needed to maintain his schedule for work and couldn't stay up all hours like when they had been kids. She'd been excited when she found him in the kitchen last night, but everything had fallen apart so *fast,* and she still didn't fully understand what she had said.

Uncle Scrooge had been equally lost, even if he had outwardly scoffed and dismissed the conversation.

"Thin skin, that lad," he'd said, and Mrs. B had stared at the both of them, like she couldn't believe neither of them understood what had happened.

But really, what had it been? Della had only implied (well, said bluntly, really) that his friends would think she was cooler than her fussy brother. And that, being cooler, people would like hanging out with her more. But she had been teasing! She wouldn't do something like that!

(And if she allowed herself to be honest, doubted she could steal anyone away from Donald, intentionally or not. He seemed to attract loyal friends like Scrooge acquired enemies.)

Thin skinned didn't really seem right, though. Donald's temper was

bad, sure, and he could be so easily insulted or enraged. But they had usually been fine with each other, knowing what buttons were safe to push for a brawl or screaming match but not cause any long-term damage. She hadn't had that insight in a long time though.

Maybe since the moon. Maybe longer.

Donald's face as he left had stuck with her. Angry sure, face turning red and fists clenched like usual. But he had looked hurt, not insulted, and the tell-tale sound of him screaming and breaking things hadn't followed his swift exit from the kitchen. He'd been gone when she had gotten out of bed, a rare late morning for her, and Scrooge was already at the office, leaving a message that their adventure had to be delayed for a few hours at least, because of another storm.

As a younger duck, Della would have insisted on trying to fly anyway, but she was older now, less foolhardy. Her kids were flying with her, she had to think about more than her own determination to brave the odds.

Her memories of the thundering crashing around the Spear of Selene drove her to move around the house finding the kids. But Huey was working on research for a new badge, something that he didn't want help with, and Dewey and Webby were off somewhere. Louie was watching TV, but Della couldn't stay with him, too keyed up to stay still and quiet on the couch, and Louie was clearly annoyed with her attempts to make conversation. Mrs. B was nowhere to be found.

So off she wandered through the Manor. The empty rooms and echoing hallways. Despite not liking waste, her Uncle Scrooge had a ridiculously large home, filled with doodads and artifacts of his adventures that hadn't gone to the Bin. She knew them all, every story and journey that they symbolized. It was a way for her to spend time, reliving the adventures she had been present for, and the ones that Uncle Scrooge had told them, her and Donald and even Gladstone and Fethry.

Of course, Fethry lacked interest in anything that wasn't some kind of fish (she shuddered), and Gladstone hated to sit around listening to people, or maybe just Scrooge. And Donald… well, Donald had pulled away, from Uncle Scrooge and adventures in general, insisting that he just wanted to relax. Play music and hang with his friends and do anything that wasn't hop on a plane to see something new and exciting.

Eventually these couldn't hold her interest, and she moved on. Donald's houseboat felt… wrong, to enter now. She had been fine with it when he was gone, but somehow going in when he was actually living there felt invasive. So that was out, and the yard was completely without anything interesting, the sky was gray with upcoming rain, and she. Was. Bored.

She could feasibly drive to the garage where the Cloud Slayer was, dink around with the engine or hang out with Launchpad. Well, get a ride there, or take the bus? She hadn't driven a car in years, and she had no idea if there was even a car here. She could maybe call Launchpad, but somehow that felt like admitting defeat. Silly, maybe, but she could find something to do for the day and work on getting independence via car later.

But that didn't solve the boredom right now, and she felt herself pacing the hallways like a caged tiger, getting herself more and more frustrated when a distraction failed to appear. In a house with so many kids and ghosts and cursed items, it was just baffling that nothing was appearing for her!

Huey eyed her from his seat in the library when she passed the fourth or fifth time, but said nothing, and Louie didn't even look up, just slumped further down onto the couch and kept sipping his Pep.

Donald and Uncle Scrooge would have recognized her pacing and

offered something to do, some new adventure to start or project to research, or a fight to pick and burn some energy. But she could hardly expect the kids to get that, and besides, she was more than capable of finding something to do, right?

There was a gym in the Manor, but Della had never done well with solo exercise; nothing hit like a real threat, and anything short of that now felt unfulfilling, like a diet version of the real thing. The music room and dance hall were temporarily distracting, but she wasn't a musician, and alone the rooms held only yawning emptiness.

She hadn't started any new adventures herself lately, maybe she could start research for a new one? But usually she had somewhere to start, and several minutes of walking the shelves of the library for some kind of inspiration left her with no more ideas, and a twitchy Huey that kept glancing at her as she moved past him.

Sitting room full of old family portraits? Seen it, nothing new (although they should get a new family one done, Donald had been talking about something like that-). Another storage room full of filing cabinets of old McDuck Enterprises paperwork? Even her current level of boredom couldn't make her read payroll reports from the 70s. Donald's childhood room? That had been exciting, until she opened the door and saw that at some point Donald had packed it up, as the room was empty of everything except the furniture.

Seeing this room, that he had filled with angsty teen music and where they had stayed up all night drinking pop and eating pilfered junk food, filled her with so many emotions at once that she fell on her butt in the center of the room and stayed there, staring at the bed.

Her thoughts had been keyed to Donald all day, and she admitted to herself that was likely why she was so antsy. They usually didn't let fights fester, when they happened. And this one had felt off, like there was something more to it.

Things had felt like that for some time, if she let herself truly think about it. Since she got back, or maybe before. Where every word that they said meant three different things, and Donald's reactions never seemed to match up to what she had said, what she had meant, and everything boiling over until -

Until she took the rocket. Until she left her family to shatter under the weight of her disappearance (of her *death,* because what else could they have possibly thought happened, when her transmissions hadn't come through?). And now here she was trying to glue things back together, but she no longer knew the shape of Donald, how he fit into things and where to put the new members of their growing family.

(Or maybe, she was the piece that didn't fit, maybe the family had grown to fill the space she had left and the issues were just that there was no room for her here).

Donald got home before Uncle Scrooge, an oddity that Della ignored as she hunted down his voice in the Manor. She heard him talking to Dewey and Webby, wherever they had been all day, and then Huey in the library, and caught him walking away from the TV room.

"Donald!" She exclaimed, and then paused, because what could she say?

"Er, didn't see you leave this morning," she continued, like a champ, and Donald glanced at her with a neutral expression, and continued walking down the hall. She fell in step, her clunking footsteps overlaying his softer ones.

"Had to go in early for something," Donald replied after a moment,

and he hefted his bag awkwardly. “I’m actually heading back out, I just wanted to say bye to the kids first. Since you’re leaving to go on a new trip tonight.”

“What, some kind of business emergency?” She tried to joke, realizing as she spoke that she had no idea what kind of work he did. Something with finance, right?

“Something like that,” he answered absently. Della frowned. Donald wasn’t always super talkative, but this felt like he was brushing her off.

“Look, about yesterday, I’m sorry,” she offered. Donald would respond to an apology, surely.

And he did, turning to look at her directly, not stopping his brisk pace through the Manor.

“For what?” He asked, mildly. Della wanted to take it as him not having been bothered, the evening's previous events being forgotten. But she felt more like she was somehow being tested.

“For… implying your friends would drop you for me?” She tried, and got an un-amused snort.

“Della, if my friends were that shallow, none of them would have ever talked to me in the first place,” he said, and that? That was fair, in an awful way. Donald had a temper, and an odd voice, and he could be clumsy and unlucky, and all those things combined had chased off plenty of casual acquaintances over the years.

“Then…” she trailed off. That had been her only guess. Donald glanced back at her again, and rolled his eyes.

“Despite what you think, not everyone is interested in endless adventures and excitement,” he grumbled, and rubbed a hand down the side of his face. “I’ve never been worried about that, I’ve worried about them getting caught up in our family’s craziness and getting hurt.”

“You always were a fusspot,” Della replied, feeling like she had solid footing for a moment, but Donald’s face contorted into a scowl, before he made an effort to smooth it over.

“Aw come on Don, you’re not denying that, are you?” She teased, because there, this was familiar, this was exactly what she had needed!

“Of course I am! I’m not fussy, I’m trying to make sure our family stays alive!” He snarled at her, the same mix of hurt and rage on his face again, and Della felt the solid ground she’d been on rapidly washing away, like sand in the tide, and she had no idea what to say.

“We’re doing just fine without you cringing and tiptoeing on every adventure!” She snapped back before she could think about it, anger bubbling up her spine like a familiar tool while she looked for angles in the argument. A gap, an opening, and then she could-

Could what?

“Sure, this time! And maybe the next time, and the one after that! But you never stop, never think you could get hurt or killed or *lost,* and if I’m not dragging you back then nobody will! Scrooge will leap right after you if he didn’t jump first, and the kids? They’d follow you right

into Hell because they *trust* you, they think you hung the damn moon and they trust that you'll have a way back!"

"I will! I *came back* from the Moon!"

" *You should never have been there in the first place!"* The walls echoed with his roar, and Della felt burning spread across her back, rage and hurt and guilt like fire, like ice, and Donald was red and steaming across from her.

"So yeah, I'm a fuss pot, or a coward, or whatever you and Scrooge and even the kids want to call me, because I need to be." He bit out, and each word was chosen to hit. And they did, with pinpoint precision.

"I'm *fussy* because the kids needed that. They need to know someone will be home, that there will be one person that isn't going to fly off into the sunset or bury himself in work and bitterness when something hurts him, or vanish to follow wherever his luck takes him, or go off to sea and never come back! They needed stability. They needed someone at home, and I was the one there.

"I'm always the one picking up, making sure that boring stuff like homework and new clothes and dinner is there, because that's what kids *need,* Della, and you just wanted to give them the stars." Donald stopped there, and Della felt the fire extinguish, replaced with numbness spreading to her fingertips.

"And sure, it's boring, it's not an adventure like fighting a gold golem or meeting a goddess. But the kids didn't need the stars, they needed their mom. And they got stuck with me," Donald finished, steam long since gone and panting like he had run a mile. Della couldn't look him in the eye.

It was nothing she hadn't thought before, that she had had no idea what to do with kids. That she had been staring at this new adventure of motherhood right in the face, and she blinked first, fled to something familiar that she could handle. And then she couldn't handle it, and everything had broken, and Donald was the one holding the pieces, just like he always seemed to.

The silence stretched the length of the hallway, until there were miles between them, years of misunderstandings and anger and guilt and so much more laying on the few feet of carpeting.

"They didn't get stuck with you," Della finally offered, and Donald twitched like he had forgotten she was there. "You were probably the best thing for them. Cause yeah, I don't know how to go shop for kids clothes, or make dinner, or do any of those little parent things you do. You're not even *here* all the time, and I can still tell that I'm falling short. You were exactly what they needed, not a mom that flew away to chase the horizon, or-" she gestured vaguely around them, trying to encompass all of Uncle Scrooge in the movement, and Donald snorted again, with more humor, so she thought it came across.

Still, he said nothing, so Della darted forwards to grab him in a tight hug.

"I am so sorry that I left you all," she choked into his shoulder, and Donald clutched her back, squeezed once.

"I forgave you for that when you managed to come back," he whispered into her hair.

"And I'm sorry for calling you boring and fussy, I know you just want everyone safe, I just miss when we used to have *fun* on adventures!"

She continued, and Donald stiffened under her arms, in surprise?

“Feels like they’ve gotten more dangerous than when we were kids,” he finally replied, and Della choked on a laugh that felt wet with tears, but her face was dry.

“Sure does. Remind me to find some easier ones to go on, there are plenty of cool places we’ve been to that the kids haven’t seen, right?”

Donald pulled back, and she let go, reluctantly, but he was smiling, just a bit.

“Webby might die happy, getting to revisit some of our old adventures,” he offered, and it felt like a peace offering. She grinned back, and felt something under her skin settle.

The Gander and the Party

Donald sipped at his champagne slowly, keeping his gaze wandering around the room, one ear pricked to listen to his earpiece. The crowd of socialites and officials moved around him, chattering and dancing. The ballroom dripped with jewels and silks, glitter and opulence in every corner of the room.

It was beautiful, but it was the shiny veneer on top of cheap garbage. This soiree was a loose cover for a series of smuggling deals and small illegal auctions, all under the glitz of an orchestra and white tie guests.

His mission was primarily to watch over the trainee agents assigned to mingle with the guests, gathering intel. SHUSH suspected that FOWL might have some fingers in a few of the auctions, but the mission was largely a training one. A simple mission to get the trainees back into the field.

Still, he kept his eyes peeled for anything unusual. Smuggling had previously been one of the Blot's methods of power gathering, and FOWL sent agents to these kinds of auctions all the time, depending on what was being sold.

He recognized some of the people here from his prior Double Duck missions, some others from the parties Scrooge had dragged him to over the years. He subtly avoided any people from the latter group, but with such a crowd, and with him having been out of this world for years in both personas, he wasn't too concerned about it.

Until he spotted Gladstone Gander across the room, laughing with a crowd of heirs and heiresses, and felt a cold sweat drip down his spine. Somehow, he didn't think that Gladstone would fall for the different voice and wardrobe.

He felt something like panic grabbing at his mind, but he threw it off viciously. This wasn't the time, and he needed to focus unless he wanted his identity to be revealed to SHUSH and the ballroom of upper class party goers all at once.

Empty champagne glass abandoned on a random table, he walked calmly, but briskly, in the direction of the cellar. Officially there were some art displays on the lower floors, a reason for people to linger and look. Unofficially, the right doors would lead to the items up for sale, most of which weren't legal to sell.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Gladstone turn his way, but they were too far apart to see if he had been recognized, and he forced himself to keep walking. No faster, no slower, didn't turn his head.

330 glanced up at him from where he sat at the bar, and he nodded once as he continued on.

The art galleries were sparsely occupied. At least one room was being used by an amorous couple for a private moment, judging by the sounds coming from the doorway, but Donald didn't stop to look. There was a vague sense of magic here, lingering like old faded spells. The ballroom was housed within a manor complex that had been owned by the same family for centuries. Maybe they had once had protective spells on the foundation, or an artifact housed in the vaults.

Beyond the galleries were several doors that seemed to house wine cellars and storage. Supposedly, the illegal auctions were somewhere around here, but how to get in hadn't been confirmed by SHUSH prior to the party.

There was echoing chatter all around him; people looking at the

displays, maybe, or maybe he was getting closer to his goal. He followed the echoes anyway, since the trainee agents should also be trying to find their way down, and he was down here partially to avoid his cousin, so he didn't mind if he went the wrong way for a bit.

The owners of the villa had several wine cellars, and more storage than he had predicted, going for what felt like miles underneath the main building. SHUSH wasn't sure if the owner himself, a young heir who was living off the family wealth, was the one running the auction or if he was oblivious. Donald personally didn't think anyone could be that oblivious to something happening in their own home, but there was no direct evidence.

The hallways at this point had faded to natural caves; the villa sat on a cliffside and had clearly built into the caverns below it. The walls were lit by wired lights and interrupted only by occasional openings going to different paths, with only a few spaces being used for storage at this point. Distantly, Donald had started hearing running water, possibly an underwater river, which could be how goods were moving in and out of the building, so he headed in that direction. Most of the chattering voices seemed to be in the same direction, also a good sign.

The opening was a surprise when he found it. One moment he was navigating another fairly narrow hallway, the next it had turned and opened into a broad underground cavern. There was a waterfall roaring into the room and disappearing out of a wide opening on the opposite side of the room, where the full moon could be seen shining into the space.

It was an unbelievably large space to all but wander into, massive and made even larger by the swathes of shadow on the edges, so Donald couldn't tell where the actual boundaries were. The closer walls were dotted by mosses and lichen, whereas the entrance had a few spindly trees reaching into the light.

It was also clearly the sight of the auction; there were crates and

tables full of items scattered around, surrounded by empty seats, guarded by various people in dark, plain suits instead of the more elaborate party wear of the guests. None of which appeared to be here, yet. A few boats were tied off in the water, and space seemed to be set aside for more, so it seemed Donald had beaten the crowd, so to speak.

His small hallway was shrouded in shadow, far away from the auction setup and awkwardly high on the wall, with a short, steep drop to the ground level. Probably not the path guests were expected to use, which was in his favor. He slipped back into the hallway briefly, and tapped his comm.

“This is DD, think I found the party. Anyone heading this way yet?” He asked quietly, then muted his mic to limit distortion; the water sounds were loud here.

“330, a few people are heading your way, nobody important just yet.”

“720, my date is taking a walk into the art displays. Rest of the guests are heading to the ballroom for a waltz.”

A few others chimed in, and 720 started making her way down to trail her mark, a prominent businessman that SHUSH suspected was an antiquities smuggler.

Donald shuffled back into the room, sliding along the wall to a slightly deeper alcove near his hallway, where the shadows were dark enough to disguise his white feathers and blue tuxedo. Then he settled in to wait, watching as the guards milled around below.

They were surprisingly focused, given that there was nobody around. Staying at their posts, some doing circuits around clearly designated

areas instead of wandering, and while they were talking, they hadn't strayed from small talk. Easy to ignore if needed, as some were. They were sharp, on point. Either they were very well paid, or the items up for auction were something very, very valuable.

He waited in the dark, trying to see the auction items from his perch along the wall, but the majority were still packed in crates or containers along the tables.

The one person he was expecting to see was the host, or whoever was in charge of this auction. Everyone in the cavern appeared to be on guard duty, nobody in charge. The boss must trust their staff greatly not to try to walk off with something. Or, maybe there was something else keeping everyone on task; cameras? Motion sensors on the entrances, or the river?

There was nothing visible around the doorway he had come through, but there could be something on the main entrances. He tapped his comm again to reach out to 720 and asked if she could keep an eye out on the main hall as she came in, and got an affirmative just as people began appearing in the cavern, near the waterfall.

It would make a beautiful space if it was dressed up nicer, and Donald was willing to bet the main entrance was better lit and decorated. As it stood, the people coming in stumbled in and were clearly squinting in the harsh work lights that met them.

The sight of such well-dressed people milling about the cave, peering at the tables and trying not to let their shoes scuff or dresses drag on the rough ground, would have been amusing under other circumstances. The clothing alone in this room was probably enough to buy a small country, without even looking at the auction items. The probable contents of the auction put a damper on the whole thing.

As more people filtered in, Donald found himself watching for Gladstone, hoping the man wouldn't appear. The last thing they needed was him showing up at the auction, and Donald didn't want to think about what he would do if he had to arrest his cousin.

For the moment, there was no sign of him, and the slow shuffling towards the provided seating told Donald that they were nearing start time. He could see 720 coming in, blending in with the crowd and staying near the back, and a few other trainee agents already in the room. 330 was nowhere to be seen, which was interesting, as he was meant to be tailing the party's host. So either this was all done without the owner's knowledge, or he was content to not run it himself.

A cough, and the room went quiet. Standing in front of the crowd was a nondescript robin in a dark suit, hands folded behind his back. He waited a moment after everyone went quiet, then greeted the assembled guests. The auction had begun.

Donald listened with half an ear as smuggled art, plates for counterfeit currency and all manner of illegal goods were politely fought over. Fish eggs from endangered species, poached furs and feathers, missing relics and forgotten treasures bought and sold underground by people that only cared about them because they were rare.

SHUSH couldn't get every one of these, even if they wanted to, but Donald made notes about any that were particularly egregious for a more personal visit later. Double Duck was tied to certain rules, but Donald wasn't. Might be a risk to his identity, but in his experience criminals didn't report a theft of smuggled goods.

He hadn't heard any weaponry go through the auction so far, and some of the guests left as items went by. Smaller purchases were carefully packed and brought back towards the entrances, in what Donald thought were disguised wine crates. Some of the larger pieces had been loaded onto the boats, others were moved to the side. Still,

there were a few larger boxes and containers left, and half the guests remained.

With everyone seated, Donald had no idea which of his fellow agents were still present and which had left with their targets. He stayed where he was, watching as the remaining crates were bid on. Some guns now, bombs, something a militia would be interested in. He kept his eyes on the hands that bid, recognizing nobody; either these were all new players, or the warlords and private armies were sending proxies now. Smarter, but warlords weren't always willing to delegate such tasks, so something to watch.

The two voices bidding on a crate of missiles rose, enough to echo, and the crowd grew still and tense. The guards shifted subtly, moving without moving to remind the auction goers that they were present. Donald felt his hand slip to his gun, eyes darting, but the pressure dissipated, and one of the bidding voices withdrew.

In his ear, the trainee agents chimed in as they got back to the surface, confirming who had left the auction. According to their intel, a second auction would also be taking place, but the items at this one were technically legal, so it would be above ground. Donald had expected there to be more here, honestly, but there could have been backroom deals going on before the auction began.

"330 here, if our host knows about the party downstairs he deserves an Oscar. Only thing he seems to want to do is get some company for tonight," 330 chimed in, and Donald almost missed the next item as he laughed.

Then any mirth he had felt fled, when he saw some familiar looking power cells being unveiled from the next crate.

The crowd below him murmured disinterestedly; nobody seemed

overly invested.

"This is DD; anyone still at the party, the next song is a good one," he hissed into the comm, and got nothing but static. Obviously nobody who was still present could say anything without it being obvious they were wired, so Donald had to wait, tense, as the bidding began, straining to see and hear over the water.

He couldn't get any closer, not without possibly drawing attention, and he couldn't tap into any other skill sets without risking someone who knew what they were doing noticing a burst of magic.

Below, only one voice entered a bid. It wasn't the Blot, the voice sounded female, and Donald peered feverishly at the guests to find the owner. The crowd had thinned, he could see the woman with a hand raised after a moment, a red-haired duck though she nearly blended into the other people anyway; something about her was forgettable. She waited, calmly, as the robin running the auction to confirm the bid (and it was the only one, strange in itself) and confirm she had won the cells.

The last time Donald had seen that kind of power cell, they had nearly blown Gizmoduck and himself sky high. It was the one thing that they hadn't been able to source for Dr. Ghast's portal machine, and despite Gyro's best efforts they still weren't sure how they had acquired the energy in those cells.

Well, Donald was mostly sure, but Gyro still insisted magic wasn't real, and Gizmo wouldn't directly argue, so it remained in debate.

These cells were packaged in a lead container, Donald couldn't tell if they were powered or not from here. If they were, they had found another trail for the Blot. If they weren't… it was still worth investigating, but technically power cells were just batteries;

specialized ones, sure, but they didn't have to be related.

Below, the power cells had been set aside, and the last crate had been opened to reveal more guns. Donald waited, eyes moving between the woman and the power cells restlessly, waiting.

He didn't have any trackers on him; if those cells left he had no way to track them. His best bet would be to follow the woman, but at the same time, he needed to know if the cells had power, and if so, what it was. People were leaving the auction in larger groups now, but the woman lingered. Donald took the opportunity to move, hoping that the crowd below him would keep attention off of him, and slunk along the cavern walls towards the crate holding the cells.

Closer now, he could see his target had walked up to the river boats, one of which was still unloaded.

If she got on the boat with the cells, he was screwed. He cursed silently that he had no way to plant something, and moved along the shadows until he reached the crates.

Lined with lead though they were, Donald's senses were stronger, and from a few feet away he could already tell they were filled with stolen magical power. He fought off a wave of nausea, and continued walking along the shadows away from them, grimacing.

Two priorities now: to track these power cells before they could be used in some new doomsday device, and track down the seller.

This didn't really suit the Blot's earlier motives; had prison changed his priorities, or was he working under duress? He may have decided to sell his tech to finance his escape?

Too many guesses, not enough answers; Donald moved closer to the woman, who was speaking to a few of the guards that lingered. Had the different auction attendees each sent their own guards? That would be one way to keep people honest, Donald supposed, though it was risky.

"These power cells are finicky, so they need to be handled with care. I want them shipped back to base by midnight, but for god's sake, be careful," she was saying as Donald crept closer, hidden from view by an outcropping of rocks and a few empty crates. He didn't exactly have a plausible reason for standing here, which was nerve wracking on its own, and he could hear the other agents chirping occasionally in his ear that they were back in the main building. He was on his own down here, and it would be so, so easy for them to dispose of him in the river.

"They need to be in Duckburg in two days; if you so much as scratch one, you better hope it explodes and kills you, because I will do far worse, believe me."

Duckburg. Why did they always want to go to Duckburg. And two days wasn't a lot of time to track them down when they arrived, even if they would take time to be installed. If he was lucky (and he so rarely was), the device they would be used for wasn't built yet, but he couldn't depend on that.

This place was too well guarded to raid before the cells got shipped out; they might be able to get surveillance down to the river coming out of the cavern, but for that, he needed to get aboveground and make a call.

What a time for the kids to be out of town, he thought guiltily, because it was one less thing he would be worried about. Selfish, to think of his family first, but what could he do?

The woman moved away, and Donald waited as long as he could stand before he moved to follow her, heading towards the main exit with the last remaining guests. Thankfully, the people remaining were more focused on not making eye contact with him to realize he hadn't been present earlier, and his presence remained uncommented on.

He lost his target as he walked, and wanted to swear, but kept moving at a casual pace, listening for her sharp voice. Nothing, nothing at all, and soon he arrived back on the main level, scowling.

In his ear, the trainee agents were providing updates on their targets and the movements of the other guests; Donald had to forcibly remind himself that none of them knew what he had seen, they had no idea what potential issue they were facing.

This mission was supposed to be a training one, not a countdown to doomsday.

"This is DD; anyone have eyes on a red haired duck that just left the party?" Negative, no, nothing, and Donald gave in to the urge to groan, just to himself, but couldn't do anything else without garnering attention.

He had started to mentally write up what he needed to do next, already moving away from the current mission to focus on the next issue, and nearly missed the next update.

"I got hold of DJ Robin, I have a copy of the set list to look at later," 330 offered. Donald paused, blinking, before he let out a long, low whistle.

“That is fantastic news,” he replied, no matter that he should be limiting the comm line to reports and updates. The remaining trainee agents provided their updates, and the comm line went silent.

First step, Donald thought as he walked, was to get somewhere quiet and alert SHUSH. If they moved fast enough they could intercept the cells before they left at all, and even if they missed them, they could potentially track flights heading to Duckburg. It was highly unlikely the woman was flying the cells out commercially, but they may be able to track private flights coming in.

The issue was, there were tons of people wandering the estate, and any of them could be working for the Blot, or the woman, or FOWL, or even another agency that might be willing to barter information for the right price. Donald needed privacy, and he needed it fast, before midnight rolled around and the power cells left the building.

“Hey there! I’m a bit lost, do you know where the- Donald?”

Donald froze; he’d been so focused that he had walked right up to Gladstone, who was grinning at him, a few of his earlier crowd lingering in earshot. He looked pleased to see him, which would be interesting at literally any other time.

“Ah, sorry, I think you’ve got me mistaken for someone else,” Donald replied slowly, aiming for baffled, and emphasizing a mild Italian accent. He didn’t have any faith in it holding up, Gladstone had grown up with him, but he had to try.

Gladstone’s eyes didn’t match his smile, and went wide with confusion and something else as he opened his beak.

“Oh? Gladstone, who’s your friend? I thought you didn’t know anyone

here!" A male voice, clearly drunk, cut in, and a dog in a bespoke tuxedo stumbled into them both, leering up at Gladstone. His eyes made an unsubtle trip down and up, before they moved briefly to Donald.

Gladstone shrunk away from the dog's hands, playing it off as fixing his lapels, and looked back up at Donald.

Panic. The expression in his face was panic. Gladstone was frozen, eyes darting from Donald back to the dog, who hadn't noticed the silence, and the hangers-on around them had moved away.

The dog wasn't deterred by Gladstone shying away, hands wandering and intentions clear on his face.

"Gladstone and I used to run in the same circles; if I had known he was here I might have tried to chat earlier," Donald said before he could think about it, praying that he could convince his cousin he wasn't actually Donald once they were away from the dog that he now recognized as the host, Santiago Acosta. From a few feet away, 330 caught his eye. He signed 'distraction' with one hand and looked back at Gladstone.

"You still know how to dance? I haven't been able to get to the ballroom all night!" He asked, and Gladstone's eyes lit up, taking his arm and moving away faster than good manners would allow for.

"Of course I still know how to dance! Come on, let's cut a rug!" He cheered, too enthusiastically, and from behind him, Santiago frowned.

Donald turned to follow the arm tugging at his, but from behind him, there was a shout of 'shots!' and a loud cheer; a quick glance showed Santiago turning to follow the noise at the open bar.

Gladstone didn't stop until they actually reached the ballroom, but stopped short of the dance floor itself, pausing to slump slightly against the wall.

"Ah, thanks for the assist there," he panted. Donald nodded once, glancing around. There were balcony doors on the other side of the ballroom leading to the veranda and down to the gardens, which would be an opportune place to make a call if he could get far enough from the house.

"So, not-Donald, didn't catch your name?" Gladstone continued; Donald gave him a glance that he hoped passed for mild interest.

"Giovanni. Pleasure to meet you," he offered his hand; Gladstone gave him a long look before taking his hand in a firm grip. Donald let go first, gesturing vaguely towards the balcony.

"I'm afraid I need to cut this chat short; I might recommend staying away from Mr. Acosta for a while," he said, and turned to walk towards the doors. Gladstone let out a soft noise, maybe of protest, and fell into step next to him.

"Mind if I accompany you? It's not everyday you meet your cousin's clone!" Donald cursed to himself, kept his face calm, if a bit puzzled, and glanced back at his unwanted company.

"I can't say I know who you mean," he replied absently, snagging a drink off of a passing tray and sipping absently as they walked. Gladstone watched him from the corner of his eye, squinting at the champagne as though expecting it to magically change to water.

“You’re the spitting image of my cousin. Only thing you’re missing is a gaggle of ducklings following you,” he finally replied. Donald forced a mild laugh.

“Afraid I don’t have any children, never had any interest. I wish your cousin all the luck on that front,” he managed, trying to figure out how to lose his cling-on, and fast.

“I’d say he needs it, his luck is the *worst,* but he's probably the best parent I’ve met. Kids are lucky to have him,” Gladstone said quietly, almost too quiet to be heard over the music in the ballroom and the chatter of the crowd. Donald glanced at him, and said nothing.

It was pleasantly cool outside, and the gardens were all but deserted. The few people Donald could see as they walked down the stairs were more interested in their partners than in anyone walking by.

“This has been pleasant, but I need to make a phone call. A private one,” Donald said briskly, stepping towards a pagoda set below a few drooping trees. Gladstone stopped, and stared at him while Donald walked away. Donald had expected an argument, or for him to try and listen in, but took the win and moved away.

He checked the pagoda for listening devices, then pulled out a jammer that should in theory block signals for any he might have missed, and dialed out.

“This is DD. I have a confirmed sighting of power cells matching Dr. Ghast’s at the auction. They’re being shipped out via the underground river at midnight, and are being sent to Duckburg. Confirmed they are powered and dangerous, they are being transported in a lead-lined crate.”

He added a description of the woman who had completed the purchase and ended the call when he confirmed the message had been received. Then he took a long, slow breath, and leaned against the wall of the pagoda, staring at the roof supports.

330 had the auction information, which meant they might be able to find the seller, and the power cells would, with a little luck, be intercepted by other SHUSH agents soon.

He glanced back down the path. Gladstone was still standing there, watching the house. He looked lost, and a bit small, wrapping himself in his jacket. Donald sighed, and walked back.

“You know, it isn’t my place, but I think you should consider leaving the party early. Santiago doesn’t seem like good company at the moment, if he ever is,” he said quietly as he reached his cousin. Gladstone jumped, looking back with wide eyes. He hid his fear faster this time, but it was still clear, and Donald frowned.

“Yeah, this little soiree isn’t really my scene. Didn’t really want to be here anyway, but couldn’t find a way out of it,” Gladstone said easily, casually. Donald felt his frown deepen. If Gladstone truly didn’t want to be here, his luck would normally get him out of it. Why wouldn’t that be the case this time?

Was seeing Donald here somehow the luckier scenario? Or was it like the House of Fortune all over again?

He wanted to ask, but his secret identity was already paper-thin, if Gladstone bought it at all, and he needed to retain some plausible deniability.

“Well, now would be a prime moment to sneak out. He seemed a bit

too drunk to notice," Donald offered, and received an amused snort in return.

"Yeah, that would probably be wise. He offered me a room, but I don't think I want to stick around to use it," Glad said absently, looking up at the house thoughtfully. Donald opened his mouth, again, to say what he didn't know, but he was cut off by someone else walking up the path, chatting loudly on the phone and clearly oblivious to their surroundings.

"We're running out of easy sources as it is! Nothing at this auction met his prissy standards, and we don't have any other leads! Stubborn bastard thinks he's making himself impossible to replace, that's all it is!"

Donald didn't hesitate to slip into the shadows of the trees lining the path, only realizing when he got there that he had dragged Gladstone along with him.

"Yeah, yeah, 'magic isn't predictable, it's unseemly chaos,' blah blah blah. McDuck is sitting on a pile of supposedly magical shit, but sure, he can't figure out how to predict if something is useful without examining it himself."

The speaker emerged from another branching path, a tall beagle that looked like he would be at home with the Beagle Boys, dressed in a badly fitted suit.

"Complete bust, only useful thing was that Acosta didn't skimp out on the booze," the beagle continued to complain, moving out of earshot back towards the manor. Donald moved to follow, noting absently that Gladstone was following him.

“Next time, I vote we just find some magicians or whatever and use them instead of looking for magic crystals in some art auction,” the beagle griped, pausing to scrape something off his feet, and Donald paused, but he continued on without appearing to notice Donald and Gladstone trailing after him.

The beagle was silent for a long time, to the point that part of Donald wondered if he had ended his call, while the rest of him screamed at the sheer coincidence. There was no way that he had just *stumbled* onto someone working for the Blot, right? He was just imagining things, so focused on that particular issue that he was hearing what he wanted to hear.

Then again, he thought as he glanced at Gladstone again, who was stumbling a bit in the dark but was otherwise silent. Then again, Gladstone was a ‘magician, or whatever’ in a way, wasn’t he? It would be like his luck to give him a warning like this, and Donald was one of the few people that would recognize it for what it was.

“Yes, I’ll head there next,” the beagle responded to his phone, much more formal than he had been. His spine had straightened and he was walking more briskly towards the manor. “Could use a second pair of hands on deck if there’s anyone to spare.”

Go where? Donald strained to hear, but the phone was too far away to hear the responses.

“Tell the Blot that he needs to come up with a better method of finding power, or we’re going to have to find a different power supply for his toys.”

The beagle reached the stairs and started back up towards the ballroom. Donald stopped at the base and took a shuddering breath.

“He didn’t mean the *Phantom* Blot… did he?” Gladstone asked, and this time the fear stayed in his eyes. Donald looked back at him. Even in the dark, it was clear how pale he was, his green eyes shining from the party lights.

“Gladstone.” Donald spoke, and he didn’t recognize his voice at all. “I really think you should visit your cousin as soon as you can get a flight out of here.”

Now the Bad News

Donald switched out for Agent RN and all but bolted into the temporary mission base, buzzing and twitchy despite the late hour. He'd gotten a single message confirming they were tracking the power cells and would be attempting a retrieval, but after that things had been radio silent. He'd called in what he had overheard from the beagle, but it was more information that didn't actually help things. The Blot had partners that were aware of how his technology worked, they had suspected that, and the beagle had vanished into the party by the time he had made it up the stairs.

Gladstone was gone, had gotten a flight with no issue, just before a huge storm rolled into the area. Donald hadn't asked where he was going, though he assumed that his cousin would be showing up in Duckburg eventually. He didn't exactly have other places to go, unless he lucked into another hotel stay somewhere.

If he didn't show up, would that mean that they should be expecting an attack…?

No. It was useless trying to make predictions based on Gladstone's luck, he knew that, but the situation had him jittery and afraid.

He reached the meeting room (really more of an open bay area that had a table, separated by a few rolling whiteboards), where two other agents were waiting.

"Agent DD, I'm Agent FN, you can call me Finn, and this is my partner Agent B7. We have an update on the power cell transport," the bulldog greeted, and Donald managed a terse nod, taking a seat. B7 passed him a steaming cup of coffee, which he took with a murmured thanks.

“We were able to find the boat transporting the cells down river before they reached a barge; our agent was unable to remove the cells, so we’ve placed a number of trackers on the crate, the boat and on the transport barge. We’re hoping to complete a raid once they have reached their permanent base, as the barge is currently moving,” Finn explained, and Donald slumped. He knew that it was better to have more of the probable terrorists or mad scientists identified, but sue him, he would far prefer having the cells in a safe place.

“Be careful when we do get close; the woman that bought them was very clear that they were delicate and could be easily damaged. The ones in Duckburg overloaded and exploded, from what I was told,” he said instead, gratified to receive a serious nod from both agents.

“We’ve seen the footage. I’m not familiar with Duckburg’s vigilante situation, but I do know one of the heroes has been called in for more information. If these cells were built the same way as the first set, his information may help neutralize the cells,” B7 offered. Donald hummed an agreement, and hoped that Gizmoduck and Gyro had made more progress on that front in the last few days.

“Do we have any information on the buyer yet? I didn’t recognize her or any of her staff at the auction,” Donald asked. B7 shook her head.

“Nothing so far, but our agent on site got a decent array of photos, including of your mystery woman. Facial recognition is running now, and we’re trying to track the registration for the boat.”

“Agent 330 said he had gotten hold of the auction details, that might have something,” he offered absently, and was met with twin looks of surprise.

“330?”

“One of the trainees. He’s still at the soiree, we didn’t have a chance to discuss the details yet,” Donald replied, feeling proud. 330 would make a fantastic agent when he was out in the field. Finn let out a relieved sigh.

“Well. That is good news. Now, onto your later report…?” Donald sat up straighter.

“I overheard another guest confirm that the Phantom Blot had helpers at the auction, looking for magical artifacts. It was unclear if the Blot is a completely willing participant or being coerced, but the people he’s with now are getting fed up with his methods and lack of results. While he didn’t confirm that the Blot is the source of the power cells, it seems a reasonable deduction at this point.”

“Magical artifacts?”

Donald braced himself to have the magic debate, again.

“How familiar are you with the Phantom Blot’s original crime spree?” He asked, and B7 replied.

“Very little. I’m aware that these power cells are a close match to his original work, but that’s all I know. We’re not on the taskforce,” she gestured between Finn and herself. Donald nodded.

“He used experimental technology to drain magical energy, for lack of a better term, from people and artifacts. Holy relics, fortune tellers, whatever he could get his hands on. The objects were usually fine, at least physically, though if they had any powers prior they were no longer functioning.

“The living victims were usually killed as a result; very few of his victims survived.”

Donald paused, staring into the two agents’ eyes clearly, who looked back with the gravity the situation deserved.

“His exact plans seemed to be a doomsday device, based on the prototypes found when he was arrested, but he never admitted to anything besides trying to rid the world of filthy, chaotic magic.”

There was more to it, but Donald was already toeing the line of what was publicly available information, and what he could feasibly have found in SHUSH reports.

“So, he has people going to auctions of smuggled goods looking for magic wands and religious idols?” B7 asked, while Finn frowned, tapping a pen on an abandoned memo pad. Donald tilted his head in thought.

“It sounded like he is, but that’s either not enough power for what he’s doing, or they’re not having any luck finding useful items. The beagle specifically mentioned Scrooge McDuck having a large number of supposedly magical artifacts,” Donald added, wondering if they would try stealing from the Bin instead of targeting people. “For whatever reason, it didn’t sound like they’re currently interested in targeting people this time.”

“Too attention grabbing? They did a good job covering up his escape, whoever his allies are. They may be trying to fly under the radar,” Finn mused, writing a few notes.

“It could be. Which raises the million dollar question: who broke him out in the first place? Who has the motive here?” B7 replied. Donald took a long sip of coffee; it was hot and tasted like tar.

He took another sip. He’d had worse.

“And who has the resources for it; organizing an escape like that required a lot more work than just busting down a wall,” Finn returned; B7 twisted to look at her partner directly.

“Some new villain hoping to make waves? If they had the money but not the brains, hiring a prior villain would be a shortcut.”

“But why would the Blot join them? Sounds like he had a specific vendetta against, er, magicians?” He glanced briefly at Donald, who shrugged.

“Magic users or mages both work fine; there’s a lot of different types,” he answered, taking another gulp of coffee.

B7 eyed him thoughtfully.

“You’re pretty well-versed in this; maybe we should have a training course in magical theory,” she offered, grinning in dark humor. Donald returned the expression.

“I know a bit, mostly from staying in Duckburg a few times” he hedged, “but we could really use an expert. Mind you, the majority of them are either insane or too distrustful to come in and teach a SHUSH class…”

Not to mention, Donald thought to himself, the lines between his various identities were already getting blurry. The last thing he needed was to give Double Duck any more magical knowledge. Paperinik, that he could manage, but could he come in to SHUSH as his caped persona without anyone asking questions?

Something to ponder.

“Just something to consider. I’m not assigned to the mission anyway,” B7 said, leaning back. Donald shrugged.

“Not yet. In my experience, once your Op gets tied up in some larger investigation, you get added to the taskforce,” he told her, smirking when she made a face at the idea.

“Hopefully not, we have enough on our plates, with the FOWL movements in… Greece…” she trailed off, blood running away from her face. Donald felt cold certainty pour down his spine, and across from him, Agent FN stiffened. They all looked at each other.

“We have no evidence of that,” he pointed out, but his voice was shaken.

“They would have the resources,” B7 retorted.

“And a potential motive; they had an interest in world domination, and the Blot’s technology was uniquely hard to counter back in the day,” Donald added, fist clenching in his lap.

He was the only one that *had* tech to fight the Blot's machines. The shield, he had already let Gizmoduck examine, they could disperse that if needed. They would need to find a way of tracking the power cells, maybe tracking magic in general?

But what if that technology got stolen? If the Blot had a magic tracker…

“Look, it’s been a long night, we have a lot of new intel. Let’s just wrap up debrief and get some sleep before we jump to any conclusions,” Finn was saying. Donald turned back to the pair. B7 looked mulish, but there were bags under her eyes; clearly they were all overworked.

Donald recalled Ravenson saying they had fewer and fewer competent agents in the field, and sent a quiet prayer for a bit more calm. Just a bit, until the new trainees were ready to take to the field.

“It’s an avenue to investigate, at least,” Donald pointed out, “but I agree, we should go over what we know for sure and come back with fresh eyes.”

Not that he thought he would be getting much sleep.

Morning produced the trainees and remaining field agents, most of whom had no idea he had been pulled from the mission to report on the Blot instead. He swore some of them were disappointed, though disappointed in what, exactly, he didn’t know. That his part of the mission had gone so very crazy by comparison?

Regardless, he made sure to loudly congratulate 330 on getting the

auction intel, and pressed him for the details until the chicken was blushing. He deserved some praise.

As it turned out, the robin running the auction *had* been working for the host Santiago, and had found him after it was over to confirm everything had been handled. Santiago had insisted on getting the written list of buyers and sellers, and after a lengthy argument the robin (whose name was apparently Raul) had handed the coded list over. 330 had then pick-pocketed it.

“Honestly, he probably won’t even notice until Raul asks him about it, if ever. Even if he does realize he lost it, he was really drunk. By the way, DD, what was the distraction for? I couldn’t hear what he was saying to that guy you were talking to,” 330 added after everyone had asked their questions. Donald winced; he’d hoped 330 would have forgotten the details.

“Santiago was getting aggressive; the guy pretended we knew each other and asked me to dance with him to get Santiago off his trail. I didn’t want a fight if he followed us to the ballroom,” Donald explained, hoping that nobody had seen Gladstone too close. Donald could write off his own appearance, between the voice changer and claiming to just ‘have one of those faces,’ but him *and* Gladstone together might be too much to write off as a coincidence.

“Aw, we missed you dancing?” T86 teased, and Donald laughed, shaking his head.

“Didn’t get all the way there, had to call in about the power cells. But I’ll have you know I am an excellent dancer,” he told them in the snootiest voice he could muster, getting a few laughs.

“So, the power cells are probably being made by the Phantom Blot, which is a case that’s so classified we’re not allowed to know much of

anything, *and* you overheard one of his lackeys on the phone barely an hour later?" K17 asked dubiously. Donald shrugged.

"Sometimes you get intel through hard work and digging, and sometimes you luck out and are in the right place at the right time. The key is knowing what to do with what you learn. Besides, SHUSH did think it was possible the Blot would be involved with the auction, he did that before he went to prison too. So it wasn't that unexpected," Donald explained, but in all honesty, he was surprised at the coincidence himself.

The phone call, that he could put down to having Gladstone with him, but having both events at once tugged at his mind. There was something odd about it.

"Gee, how come Acosta's illegal auction staff let you eavesdrop on both of the Blot related things at the party?" 720 muttered, and got a few chuckles, but Donald frowned at her in thought. It would be a massive coincidence that the *only* two events that involved the Blot, he was present for.

Unless, of course, there had been more than the two. The beagle had said that there was nothing useful at the technically legal auction for the Blot, but that didn't mean that the beagle had been the only one there doing the search. After all, having more people, potentially experts, looking for magical artifacts would be better than just one, especially at a large auction.

It wasn't a comforting realization, that there could have been any number of people there working for the Blot. Nothing he could do about it though, so he forced himself to move on.

The river barge that the power cells had been loaded onto had moved overnight to a harbor, where everything was transferred into a waiting

plane. Which was promptly grounded for bad weather and was currently sitting on the runway, ready to go. The red haired buyer was nowhere to be found.

Donald wanted to be on the team that got the cells back, but was vetoed by Finn and B7, to keep his identity secure. Which was reasonable, but made things no less frustrating as he waited tensely in mission control for news.

The raid team couldn't get close to the plane without being seen, and the guards weren't leaving for anything, no matter how bad the weather got. And it got bad; Donald almost suspected supernatural involvement. There were uprooted trees blocking half the roads to and from their base, and his ears wouldn't stop ringing from the howling winds.

He called Ravenson while they waited, to report their potential theory about who had broken the Blot out of prison.

"It's just a possibility right now, we don't have any hard evidence, but the timelines match up suspiciously well, and they would have the resources," he explained on speaker, so Finn and B7 could contribute. The wind made it hard to hear, but what could you do? Some things couldn't reasonably be an email.

"I'll pass the theory on to the task force," Ravenson sighed, "But it would be quite a coincidence if our two problems merged into one like this. Do you have anything concrete at all?" Donald got the impression they were being humored.

Or perhaps just him, as Agents B7 and Finn had both been dubious about saying anything to Ravenson without any proof.

“Not as of yet. We were able to get the list of buyers and sellers from the auction that will hopefully lead us to the Blot and whoever is helping him create these power cells. We’ll have to see if that leads us to FOWL or elsewhere.” Donald replied, glancing at his copy of the list. The names were clearly coded, as were the items. They couldn’t depend on the auctions being in order either, so they would have to break the code to get anywhere. Thankfully the trainee agents had taken to the task with wild enthusiasm, possibly due to sheer boredom. They couldn’t fly out either because of the weather, and Donald could hardly create a training assignment when they may need to provide backup to the raid mission agents.

“Don’t get so caught up in your pet theory that you can’t see other possibilities,” Ravenson warned, and Donald muffled a scoff. Did she think he *wanted* the Blot to be colluding with FOWL?

He had to admit it would be convenient in a way, just to know that to take down one was taking down the other, but in the decades since FOWL had begun, they hadn’t been able to completely destroy the organization. Them having the Blot meant that the Blot was protected by some of the best of the best in the criminal world.

Still, he said nothing, just made a noise of agreement. If he wanted to be petty, he would have pointed out that he wasn’t officially assigned to this mission. He was assisting on the parts they needed sheer numbers for, like the facial recognition still being run on the prison security tapes, but that was it.

Unless you counted the superhero portions.

“Any word on the power cells?” She then asked, and Donald let Finn take the phone so he could take a breath, unclenching his jaw and fists.

“We were able to track the plane to the airport, but we can’t get in close without causing a firefight, and they can’t move until the weather clears. We’re waiting for an opportunity to move in,” he explained, while Donald looked back at the wall.

It housed, amongst other things, a large screen displaying the tracking data for the crate, the barge, and their agents. Nothing had moved since the last time he had looked.

Finn continued to relay what the other agents had learned during the mission, while Donald continued to look over the tracking data. Agents, barge, plane. Agents, barge, plane. Agents, barge-

Why was the tracker shorting out for the plane? Donald stood, moving closer, and watched as the plane tracker flickered. On, off, on, off. On, off, on on on, and then there were two results, then one again. He stared, then dove for the communicator sitting on the table.

“This is Command, the plane tracker is glitching like mad. Report?” He snapped, too hurried for manners, and waited as the line returned static.

“Uh, plane is rocking back and forth a bit, might be the wind? Lights are on inside, no other movement,” an agent replied, Donald didn’t know who.

“The plane is loaded with extremely volatile power cells,” he bit out, tempering his tone to commanding when it wanted to be panicked. “The storm moving the plane may be enough to trigger a reaction. Move your agents to a safer distance.”

Static.

More static.

“Yes, sir. Retreating to the further guard tower and awaiting further orders,” the agent replied, and the trackers moved away. Slower than Donald liked, but at least they were moving.

The plane tracker flickered to show three, then one, then gone again, then back to one. The agents slowly, slowly, inched across the screen. Donald clutched the comm and stared. From behind him, B7 made a noise he didn’t bother identifying.

“DD, are you sure that’s necessary?” She asked. Her words were dubious, but her tone was concerned. One. Three. Two. Gone. One again. Donald glanced back at her. Her face was pale.

The tracker on the screen flared, a dozen lights in one place, and then was gone. It didn’t come back.

The communicator spoke up again.

“This is Agent BN. The plane just- it’s *gone.* ” BN said, complete disbelief, nearly drowned out by static and background noise.

“There seems to have been an explosion, there’s scattered plane parts on the tarmac, but most of it was obliterated. We’re waiting for the heat to dissipate to investigate.” Another pause.

The room was silent. Some of his trainee agents had gathered into their meeting area. They all were holding their breath.

“All agents are fine, we were able to get out of the blast zone in time.”

Donald let out a long, slow breath, and slumped back into his chair. The tension in the room snapped like a wire, and a few people let out hysterical laughs, quickly muffled. Donald glanced over at B7 and Finn, who were both clearly shaken and sitting next to each other. Finn was still holding the phone.

“We’re moving to the blast site. Initial conclusion is the explosion started in the belly of the plane, the wings and nose are the most intact pieces here. No sign of survivors.”

“I think we found the remains of the storage crate; there’s a destroyed tracker casing melted into the lead. The lid of the case is gone, most of the case is melted apart. Whatever was inside seems to have caused the explosion.”

A long silence.

“We haven’t found any signs of the guards that were on the plane, security from the airport is coming now. Orders?”

B7 took the communicator, dictating the handling of local law enforcement and how to handle the investigation. Likely they would chalk the whole thing up to a terrorist plot gone wrong. Which was, really, exactly what had happened.

Donald stared at the screen, at the blank space where, a few minutes ago, there had been a plane, and people loading it full of dangerous items.

Did the guards know what their cargo was? Did they even know they were committing a crime?

Did they have families?

“Did the guards set off the explosion and slip away when our agents were moving?” Someone asked. Donald didn’t look over to see who.

“The Duckburg explosion had some strange effects on organic matter, per the hero’s report. We have no idea if that may have happened here.” He said in a low, cold voice. But in truth, he was already certain that the guards had never left the plane.

The Gander Pier

Donald waited until the team reported in from the airport, but there wasn't much they could learn from the explosion they didn't already know. They were still investigating if the guards may have escaped and set off the explosion intentionally, but the wait for those results would be a while, and not something Donald could assist with.

And he already had drawn his own conclusion about what had happened to the guards, and it wasn't nearly as hopeful.

They hadn't been able to identify either the red haired woman or the beagle from the party, so with the cells gone and all witnesses missing, they were effectively back at square one. And with no way of knowing if the guards had realized they had been followed, the group that had purchased the cells might go to ground.

The only thing they had to work with was the auction sheet, which the trainees were still working on breaking apart, even as they flew back to Duckburg when the storms cleared. He could hear them still chattering away behind him on the plane.

"Remember not to overthink it," he called absently during a lull in their debate, "Whatever the code is, it's more likely to be simple than five layers of code over each other." A handful of gazes landed on him at once.

"Wouldn't it be more secure with more layers of protection?" 720 asked hesitantly. Donald shrugged.

"It might," he conceded, "But if it was too complicated it wouldn't be useful, because it would take hours just to translate, then add new information, then re-code that. Much easier to just have one code,

maybe two, and depend on secrecy to keep people from trying to translate it." He paused, then added:

"Most criminals aren't actually expecting to get people looking at them in the first place, so they only make a minimal effort. Just enough that it isn't obvious what you're looking at. Only the really serious types bother with more elaborate set-ups."

True, if FOWL was directly involved it *was* likely a more complicated code. Or if the Blot had been running the auction, the true auction items would have been disguised as more legal ones. But there was no indication that either party had been in charge of the auction, so it was worth considering the average criminal, who was more likely to bank on flying under the radar. Especially someone as wealthy as Santiago Acosta, who was used to not facing consequences for his actions.

"OK. Let's look again with the basics. If it's a simple letter substitution, then…" And they were off again. Donald left them to it, turning back to the early reports on the trainees performance during the mission. He was decent at code breaking himself, but nothing special, and they already had a rapport from their previous courses. He'd step in if they were still having trouble later, but they still had hours left in their flight, and at least it was something to do.

He glanced out the window, and for a moment thought he saw the Sunchaser out the window, before it dipped back into the clouds and vanished from view.

His 'watch' chimed with a message from Darkwing Duck.

Darkwing: SHUSH has been asking me if we have any kind of magic expert available. you said you had someone that helped test your shield back in the day, would they be willing to come in?

Darkwing: I guess they want to teach their agents more about what to look for on the Blot thing, and honestly I wouldn't mind a lesson myself

Donald stared at the message for a long time, but the text didn't change.

Three of his identities all collapsing into each other all at once wasn't how he expected this mission to end, but there he was. He didn't think he could manage to show up as Donald the mage without someone pointing out the similarities at the very least, plus he didn't necessarily want Darkwing to know about his powers, and this was all assuming that Double Duck wasn't asked to join any training or meeting that was held.

He could ask Morgana, maybe, but her style of magic was so different from his he had no idea what she might say. He could hardly ask her to come in and insist she follow a script, and it would be incredibly suspicious if he did anyway.

Well. Morgana wasn't the *only* magic user he knew.

Paperinik: The guy I worked with last time isn't really in the business anymore, but I can make some calls

The attitude at base was electrified. The trainee mission was a complete success, and two major pieces of intel for their highest profile case had all but fallen into their laps. There were new agents pouring over the coded auction list, people trying to identify the red haired woman and the beagle, people tracking whoever had owned the plane and rented the barge. While Donald was stressed that they didn't have any answers yet, everyone else was hopeful at having new

information. It was enough to brighten his mood.

Still, he was eager to get home for a nap before he needed to meet with Darkwing and Gizmoduck about a potential magic lesson, since the heroes wouldn't be able to attend the SHUSH one.

So of course he was pulled aside by Agent C4 as soon as he walked into the base.

"Agent DD, a moment?" He asked, so polite that Donald did a double take.

"Of course," he agreed, even if he was about to drop from exhaustion. Donald had done far more with less sleep, another meeting wouldn't kill him.

Probably.

"I wanted to personally congratulate you on your trainee class," C4 said when they had stepped into an empty hallway. He looked earnest, even eager. "I was one of the off-site monitors, if you recall, and I would honestly say that they are impressive. They were… perhaps a bit off the book, but overall very well done."

Donald wondered if he had been transported to a new universe on the plane; it could happen, right?

"I am proud of how they did, and look forward to seeing them on their own missions in the future, but I can't take complete credit," Donald replied evenly, eventually, "They were mostly trained when they reached me."

“True, true, but there was a reason that the Director trusted you, when they were all but ready to send them into the field.” Here C4 paused, tapping his fingers on his thigh.

“I have heard that the Director is trying to call in some… magic expert for anyone placed on the Phantom Blot investigation. Since it came up on your mission, do you know anything about that?”

Ah, so C4 was a gossip! That was news to Donald, but he couldn’t say he was surprised. He was more surprised to learn that the man had cared enough to talk to Donald about the trainees. He’d been pretty clear about his opinion on Donald’s abilities.

“I know the Blot targets magical items and users,” Donald said vaguely, “but I haven’t heard anything about an expert. Maybe someone involved with the original case is being asked in?” C4 looked disappointed.

“Well, yes, that would make sense. So, do you believe in that… magical stuff?” C4 asked, awkwardly. Donald nodded.

“I was in Duckburg when a witch brought people’s shadows to life. Hard to argue after seeing that, you know?”

And really, what could anyone say to that? C4 waved him off, only for Director Ravenson to immediately pull him into her office.

“I heard you ran into Gladstone Gander on your mission,” she said without preamble. Donald sighed, nodded.

“I’m not sure if he caught on. He did call me Donald when he saw me, but seemed sufficiently thrown off by my voice,” Donald replied, sitting wearily in a chair. Ravenson let out a sharp breath as she sat, and nodded.

“Keep me apprised. Your identity getting out is not something we need at the moment.” Donald nodded again.

“Now, another question. I have reached out to Darkwing about speaking with the original hero on the Blot investigation, a Paperinik?” She said, beak twisting in mild uncertainty. Donald nodded yet again, feeling like a bobblehead, and her expression cleared.

“We are hoping he can lend some insight on the more unusual aspects of the case,” she continued.

“The magical ones, you mean,” Donald said blandly. How many times would he be having this conversation today?

“Precisely. I have heard that you two know each other, and I wanted to confirm first how we can protect your identity, and if there is anything you can tell me about the situation that we don’t already know.”

Donald considered the second question first; he had information about magic, and he had the original Blot technology, *and he was the one who had caught the Blot the first time.* But he couldn’t say any of that without compromising some part of his identity.

Why had he thought keeping all of these identities separate was a good idea?

“I’m not officially assigned to the Blot case yet, since I was on training rotation,” Donald finally answered, “so we can just say that I’m not part of the training for that reason, if it comes up. And if anyone asks, I got a recording after the fact if I’m joining the investigation.”

“As to the other point- I can look over the file and confirm if anything is missing, but I would need complete access to it.” He finally said, swallowing a sigh. He was having trouble justifying not letting SHUSH know about his own magical abilities. But on the other hand…

His abilities and skills were hidden and scattered in different personas and identities, each one only holding part of the picture. Nobody held all of them, not his daily, not his friends. Not the Caballeros, though José and Panchito held more parts than most.

Some of the secrecy was to protect his family and his allies from the various enemies on either side of the mask. Part of it was for self-preservation, avoiding the doubtful gazes and mistrust that Donald carried with him being applied to his other roles. He wouldn’t be able to justify keeping those secrets if it put people in danger, though that hadn’t happened yet.

Magic though, that was a whole other element. Donald knew he was powerful, even if he had never really considered the implications, and being magically powerful put a whole new set of targets on his back that even being Scrooge McDuck’s nephew never had. Revealing that information would put everyone around him in danger, even if they were just in the vicinity.

And that wasn’t even accounting for Kingdom Hearts, and the responsibilities that came with it. The multiverse depended on some level of secrecy, and Donald’s magic was tied to that.

Besides all of that, selfish though it might be, he didn't want to have SHUSH using him as their magic expert and pet mage. They were a spy agency after all, and that meant secrets within secrets within secrets were expected, and using every bit of information for the good of the mission was routine. Donald couldn't imagine that his own abilities would be exempt.

"Granted. I would also appreciate a meeting with your friend if you could organize it," Ravenson replied immediately. Donald nodded absently, trying to decide how he could wrangle that, before he set the question aside for later. One issue at a time.

Scrooge and the kids weren't back when Donald finally got back home, so he sent a message to Bentina that he was back and fell into bed. His dreams were haunted by haunted, sightless eyes and the burning distortion of stolen magic.

Morning dawned right on time no matter how tired he was, so Donald forced himself back out of his hammock and into his kitchen, rubbing blearily at his eyes.

At his kitchen table sat Gladstone, looking effortlessly and perfectly put together, grinning at Donald over the rim of a Starbeaks coffee cup. Donald stopped in the doorway, dragging his errant thoughts into order.

"Morning cuz! Hope you don't mind me just dropping in. I brought you coffee?" Gladstone said enthusiastically, gesturing to the counter where, as promised, another cup sat steaming. Donald approached it slowly, willing his bad luck to just wait a bit, let him at least drink some of the coffee before it inevitably got spilled all over his chest.

He reached the cup, managed to take a long, slow sip. It was just the

right temperature.

“I would appreciate a warning,” he grumbled, and took another sip. It was good, as good as coffee got (Donald had never cared much for specific flavors and blends, but he recognized quality at least), and he eyed his cousin over the edge. Underneath his curled feathers, Gladstone looked tired.

“But I’ll forgive you, since you brought coffee,” he added, and Gladstone subtly slumped in relief. If he hadn’t been watching Gladstone closely, Donald would have never noticed it. Noticing didn’t mean he understood though.

“What are you doing here though? I’m not making pancakes,” Donald asked. Gladstone eyed him thoughtfully over the table.

“Isn’t it Saturday though? Since when do you not make pancakes on Saturday?”

“Kids are out of town and I had a long night,” Donald grumbled. He stifled a yawn into his cup and waited.

Either Gladstone had realized they had met at the party and would start asking questions, or he had bought Donald’s lie and was just here because Donald himself had recommended it. He refused to accidentally out himself, so he just continued to watch Gladstone with mild interest.

“Oh? Hot date?” Gladstone asked, teasing grin in place, and Donald snorted into his cup.

“No, work project went late,” he said shortly, and finished his drink. He eyed the coffee pot, debating making more. It wouldn’t be as good, but Donald was seriously jetlagged and could use the caffeine.

“Well… you know, if you’re not making us anything, we could go out for breakfast. My treat?” Gladstone offered, and Donald’s eyes snapped up, suspicious.

“What do you want?” He asked, eyes narrowed. Gladstone didn’t do charitable, not without an ulterior motive. Sure, he got gifts and treats for the kids, but that was different.

“Aw come on, I can’t just want to have breakfast- well, brunch now, probably- with my favorite cousin?”

“Fethry is going to be there?” Donald asked, distracted. Was this some planned meetup?

Gladstone stared at him, blank-faced, and his curls flopped when he shook his head.

“I… I’m talking about you, Don.”

Donald stared at him.

He was being sarcastic, obviously. His favorite was clearly Fethry, or maybe Della. He and Gladstone never really got along, even as kids, why would Donald be his favorite?

Well, that wasn't entirely fair, they had had times where they had a good time together. It helped when it was *just* the two of them. Less pressure. But Della's disappearance had taken a hammer to all the fault lines and cracks of their relationship. Gladstone had come to see him and the kids sometimes, but he was a drifter, and never stayed, and on some level Donald hated that, hated him, for coming and going so easily, for not staying. If not for Donald, then for the kids.

Was it so much to ask, that someone *stay?*

When Donald failed to react, Gladstone sighed.

"Look, I want to talk to you about something, no I don't need anything, and I figured a food bribe would be a good opening." Gladstone babbled out, running a hand through his hair. Donald blinked, then gestured vaguely with the coffee cup.

"Well, that was in case you were already making breakfast when I got here," Gladstone explained, waving Donald's questions away with a gracefully lazy wave.

Donald let himself be tugged into Gladstone's (new) car, into a seat at a nice restaurant that he'd never been to. They had no wait, as usual with Gladstone, no matter the crowd waiting around them. Donald fully expected their meal to end up free at some point, and planned to leave a generous tip. Most likely something would be wrong with *his* meal, that was usually how Gladstone's luck worked around Donald.

They ordered, and Donald sipped at a new cup of coffee. Gladstone was enthusiastically chattering about the restaurant, and how the last time he had been here he'd met a famous actress, while around them the other patrons filled the room with noise.

“So, the thing that I wanted to talk to you about…” Gladstone finally said, when their breakfast arrived. Donald took a tentative bite of his food to confirm it was actually edible, then looked back up at his cousin. Gladstone looked stressed, like he hadn’t slept since they had last seen each other.

Which, neither had Donald, but it was an unexpected look on Glad, who was usually completely put together on the outside, no matter what else was happening.

“I caught wind of… I mean…” He stuttered, and then frowned at Donald, as though the struggle was somehow Donald’s fault. Par for the course, really. Donald returned his look with one of confusion.

“Did you know the Phantom Blot was out of prison?” Gladstone finally asked, leaning in close to whisper. Donald took a long, slow breath, and gave him a single nod. Gladstone slumped minutely, leaning on one elbow in a move that would normally be graceful.

“It’s not public knowledge yet, I just have… a few ears on the inside,” Donmald said lowly, glancing briefly around, but nobody was paying them any attention.

“I overheard a phone conversation about it at a party the other day, got a warning that it might be better to be back at home,” Gladstone said, almost to himself. Donald nodded.

“And I figure, you’re old friends with the guy that caught him. And better to be around family, right? My luck might not be magical, but who knows? Besides, it lets me see more of everyone, so.” Gladstone was clearly trying to put on a confident front. He was also clearly troubled. Donald nodded again.

“You’re welcome to stay in the boathouse until you find a place,” Donald offered, but was slightly relieved when Gladstone shook his head.

“Nah, I have a place figured out. But I’ll be around.”

They ate in silence for a while, before the eggs got cold.

“I mean, I would be kinda interested in what things would be like, without my luck,” Gladstone offered thoughtfully, looking over the crowded dining room. Donald almost choked on his drink, staring.

“Just to see, you know? But I haven’t heard anything good about the Blot, so it wouldn’t be my first choice to testing that,” he continued, while Donald got his breathing under control.

“Probably not how you would want to test it, no,” he finally choked out, eyes watering. “What would you try, if you weren’t lucky?” He almost suggested a casino, only just biting back the suggestion.

Gladstone shrugged.

“I dunno, maybe gardening? Or something. If I try things then they work out perfectly, it would be interesting to actually have to try at it,” he offered as an idea. Donald tilted his head.

Gladstone had never mentioned interest in any activities that required effort, not to Donald anyway. But if you never had to try to create whatever you wanted to, would it ever feel worth it? Would luck even let you create anything?

“Have you tried? Gardening, I mean. Luck would probably help you keep everything alive, but it might be worth trying anyway,” Donald suggested, but Gladstone looked dubious. He didn’t openly disagree though, just shook his head and shrugged.

“Maybe if I ever settle down. Which reminds me, I did pick up some property in town, wanted to get your opinion on something. If you could come with me? It’s not far from Uncle Scrooge’s place,” Gladstone asked, cleanly changing the topic.

Donald sighed. Probably somewhere that needed a lot of work that Gladstone had gotten for free, that he would be convinced to help with. Or it was some exciting new house with a million amenities that the kids would be dying to visit. At least it would be competing with Scrooge’s Manor for once, not Donald’s houseboat. That had long been defeated in ‘cool places to live.’

“Sure, I can take a look,” he replied anyway, because there was nothing else to say anyway, and Gladstone was his ride home.

Oddly enough they did have to pay a bill, and even odder that Gladstone paid it without issue. Nothing went wrong, nothing unusual in Donald’s bill, nothing spilled on him or broken for him to step on, nothing. It was just… normal. He stared at Gladstone long enough that his cousin noticed, earning him a grin.

“Expecting me to win a lottery or something?” He chuckled, and Donald joined with a rueful laugh. Yes, he supposed he was.

Gladstone drove towards Killmotor Hill for long enough that Donald thought he had forgotten about showing Donald his new property. Then he took a turn down a small dirt road that wound through the

woods, heading west.

The road was smooth, surprisingly, but it twisted back and forth so Donald couldn't see where it led. Donald glanced at his cousin, who looked as carefree as usual, and didn't ask. Gladstone was unlikely to try to kill him, and short of that he didn't care exactly where they were going, so he settled back into his seat.

Finally, the woods opened up, and they were facing the ocean. Donald took a surprised breath, inhaling the smell of salt and brine, and felt tension he hadn't even noticed in his spine melt away.

Gladstone pulled forward a bit more, then parked with a satisfied smirk.

"So! I got the deed for this little plot of land. Nothing super special, except for the view," he gestured around, towards the woods instead of the water. When Donald glanced up at the trees, he was surprised to be looking at a tall hill. At the top, he could just make out a building.

"Is that the Manor?" He asked, incredulous. Had Gladstone seriously bought (or been gifted) a stretch of beach just below Uncle Scrooge's Manor?

Gladstone gave him a smug grin.

"Sure is! Found a hiking trail that leads right up, actually, was about a ten minute walk. Maybe five by car down the hill, haven't tried it yet. But that's not all!" Gladstone tugged on Donald's arm, dragging him down the beach. Donald genuinely couldn't remember the last time his cousin was this enthusiastic about anything, but at the same time, he couldn't remember Gladstone ever doing anything similar to this.

Why had he gotten this land, so close to the Manor? Proximity? But he could have asked for a room, or maybe lucked into another mansion on the hill.

Gladstone stopped abruptly, gesturing towards the water. A single pier jutted out into the water above the rocks. It wasn't particularly long, and was currently empty. Donald stared at it, lost.

"So, the thing I wanted to ask you; think that dock is good enough for your houseboat?"

A beat of silence, punctuated by the waves. Then two.

"What?" Donald squawked, flailing away from his cousin to stare. Gladstone grinned back, hands hanging casually at his sides.

"Your houseboat. Could you dock it here? Cause I know I miss going out fishing with you guys, and it would be easier to go out if the boat is already on the ocean, right?" Despite the confidence in his tone and body, his eyes were nervous.

"I…" Donald stared out at the water. It felt like home, more than the Manor. More than the houseboat. The salt smell was welcoming and the sound of the waves soothed his aching head than he hadn't even noticed until now.

He walked out towards the pier, until his ankles were in the water. The breath in his lungs left in a slow sigh.

“Yeah,” he said, though he had no idea if Gladstone was still close enough to hear, “I could dock the boat here.”

He would have to talk to the boys. Would need to reschedule water and fuel trips if he did it, would have to offer to clean the pool as payback to Bentina for letting him dock there.

But if the path was that close? It was barely longer than getting to the Manor, really, and the drive was close.

Could he do that? Would the boys feel abandoned, or would they want to come with? He didn’t know. He didn’t know he didn’t know-

“Good, good. So you’ll have a designated docking space, and Fethry can probably use the dock to come up with Mitzy…” Gladstone mused, sounding pleased as punch. Donald blinked, coming back to himself.

“I can’t- what would renting a spot cost?” He asked, because nothing was free, not for him. Gladstone rolled his eyes.

“Oh, I was thinking a quarter,” he said breezily. Donald frowned.

“A quarter of…?”

“Of a dollar, Don. Yeah, a quarter a decade would do, I think.” Donald scowled

“Glad, that wouldn’t even cover your property taxes for a day, I can’t

just-" Gladstone waved him off, almost harshly.

"I get an invite when you're taking people out fishing, unless it's just the kids, or a date, I suppose. And I can call you for help if the Blot comes calling," he said, but Donald shook his head.

"I would do that *anyway,* Glad, come on…" But Gladstone's face had taken on a rare stubborn expression.

"And I got the land for a steal. It doesn't put me out any to have your boat here, I would give you the land if I thought you would take it. Besides, I already paid off the taxes for the next decade at least. Can we just let it be for that long, and debate this again later?"

No, Donald wanted to say. No, because he couldn't accept this, because this was a debt he couldn't repay.

His eyes were drawn back to the hill, where the Manor was just above the trees. Felt the waves flow against his heels.

Ten minute walk down the hill, less by car. He could be back and forth in less time than it took to get to the Second Bin under the house.

Gladstone was watching him, and he looked tense and tired and somehow desperate, as though Donald accepting this was something *he* needed.

Donald let his eyes trail down to the treeline, where there was a large amount of space before the beach itself started. He tilted his head.

“... you could build a house down here, you know,” he said quietly, “maybe even plant a garden.” Gladstone blinked at him, then turned to look at the patch of land Donald was staring at.

“I could help, a bit,” Donald continued, mildly, and Glad’s eyes snapped back to him, surprised, then pleased.

“Well, I think we could make that work,” he replied, smug grin reappearing on his face. For once, Donald grinned back, and felt something in his chest settle.

Down the Hill (and through the woods)

Gladstone drove him home before vanishing, claiming he was going to go luck into finding Fethry, or a contractor to talk about building a bungalow on the beach. Donald insisted he stay in contact, with the Blot running around, and didn't leave the car until Gladstone agreed.

The family was home, this time, so he made his way to the house, listening to cheerful babble about a tempest related artifact that had caused the rainstorms across Europe for the last few days. They had brought back a gemstone that would allow the holder to summon storms, but Scrooge said he intended to move it to storage, so it would either be in the Second Bin or left to gather dust in the garage.

Donald waited until they had wound down, then sighed, sitting up. The boys eyed him with interest, while Webby looked twitchy.

"I need to ask you all something, and please tell me the truth, okay? I won't be hurt or angry no matter what you guys answer." Now they all looked concerned.

"Unca Donald, you're making me nervous," Huey offered, and Louie nodded in agreement.

"Gladstone lucked into some beachfront property just down the hill," Donald explained, "and it has a pier. He offered to let me dock the houseboat there instead of in the pool."

The boys all stared at him, uncertain. Donald waited, breath baited and shoulders stiff, for their reactions. Anger? Denial? Would they think he was abandoning them?

“So… would we be moving down the hill?” Huey asked, tilting his head.

“Is there a way down, or do we have to drive?” Louie, looking out the window as though hoping to see the pier from where he stood.

“Does that mean we get to go out fishing again?!” Dewey, which was a surprise. Webby nodded in excitement at the last one.

“I, ah- You would stay here, unless you want to move…? Either way, your room is still your room; as far as I’m concerned, you can bounce back and forth whenever you want to. Gladstone said it was a short walk, but I haven’t gone down the path yet, so we’ll have to check. And yes, if I move the boat, we can go out on the water more,” Donald answered, eyes darting from child to child. The boys glanced at each other.

“So it’s kinda the same as now, you’re just a little bit further away, right? You wouldn’t leave without telling us?” Huey asked. Donald nodded.

“Same as now; I’ll still let you know if I’m going anywhere, and I’ll probably be here for most meals, same as before. Might be a bit sweatier, is all,” he added as a joke, and was rewarded with a few laughs.

“Why did Uncle Gladstone offer you a spot? Since when does he even live nearby?” Louie grumbled; his relationship with his uncle had been permanently damaged since the visit to the House of Fortune. Donald shrugged.

“He asked me for help with something, but I don’t know if that was his goal or if he came up with it after lucking into the property. Either

way, he offered the spot up, but I won't move unless you're all okay with it."

The children all looked at each other, communicating silently for a long moment, before they looked back at him.

"Do *you* want to do it?" Dewey asked bluntly. Donald startled, rubbing the back of his neck. He'd expected a completely different set of reactions, and felt distinctly wrong-footed.

"I- this is a family decision," he started, but was interrupted.

"That's deflecting!" Webby declared, pointing at him dramatically. The boys all nodded.

"You're part of the family, Uncle Donald, that means we need your opinion too," Louie added, and they stared at him expectantly. He looked at each of them in turn, then sighed.

"I would like to be back on the water, and being so close to the Manor… it's tempting," he admitted.

"But," he continued, before any of them could speak, "I would only move if everyone was okay with it; it's more important to me that you're all fine with the move." Because they had been left behind too many times already. Donald couldn't allow his children to ever feel like he had abandoned them. He'd honestly expected a lot worse reactions to his proposal.

"I mean, if it's only a short walk… that would be fine. It's not like you're moving to another town," Huey said reasonably. Donald felt he

knew his nephew well, and didn't see any sign he was lying.

"And we can go sailing again! Webby's never been, we *need* to go!" Dewey insisted, all excitement and energy, while Webby's eyes practically sparkled.

"Ooh, we could decorate the path with sigil stones and protective amulets!" Webby enthused, hands flapping around as she plotted.

"Plus some lamps, so we can get there in the dark," Huey added thoughtfully.

Donald turned to look at Louie, who hadn't spoken yet. Louie met his eyes, beak pressed tightly together.

"You promise our room is still there? No matter what?" He asked, so quiet it almost was lost under the others' cheerful plotting. Donald smiled sadly, knelt down and scooped Louie into a tight hug before he could overthink it.

"Always," Donald promised; he would use magic to expand the boat if he had to. Webby needed her own bunk anyway, just in case.

He glanced up at the other kids, and opened his arms up to gather them all. Webby had to be tugged in, but Dewey and Huey fell in without a pause. Despite their excitement at the idea, Donald could feel small hands clench at his back and arms.

"Uh, did I miss something?" Della asked, and the impromptu group hug broke apart. Donald dragged himself back to his feet.

“I’m going to move the houseboat to a new pier down the hill,” Donald explained briefly, “We were just discussing the logistics.”

Which prompted a new round of questions, like when he’d decided to do this, since when was there a *beach* down there, and what if there was an invasion of crab monsters? So he spent a few minutes calmly pointing out that crab monsters lived in the *Atlantic,* and it had been this morning, Gladstone found it, yes he’s in town, and really Della, why did you bring up crab monsters?

Just when he thought she was calm (and there was clearly something on her mind besides her questions) Scrooge came in, attracted to the noise, and demanded to know what was going on.

“You’re *moving?!* ”

Donald groaned, and debated fleeing. *There* was the reaction he’d been expecting.

Sort of.

“The houseboat belongs in the water, not your pool, and the beach is literally at the bottom of the hill. It’s not like I’ll be *gone* , just a bit further away.” And no longer on your property, he thought to himself, but didn’t voice it. It wasn’t like living on Gladstone’s pier was that much of a step up on that front, but being back on the ocean…

“And what, Gladstone Gander just offered that up? For some help with chores that he could luck himself into having done?” Scrooge sneered; Donald hadn’t seen his uncle in such a nasty mood in a while.

“I offered the help, and I’m paying to rent the space,” Donald snapped, his temper rising. “Why do you *care* ? I thought you wanted the ‘freeloader’ out of your pool!”

Ringing silence. Donald’s eyes darted to the children, briefly, and regretted not having this conversation elsewhere. They shouldn’t be hearing this, and their wide eyes cooled his rage like nothing else. He slumped with a sigh, rubbing his eyes.

Scrooge stared at him, brows furrowed, beak parted in a scowl. Della’s eyes darted between them, uncertain. She had seemed at least somewhat excited for him until Scrooge had come in; now she just looked… lost.

“I’ll clean the pool out when I get the boat moved,” Donald said firmly, but quietly. “I planned on still coming up for family meals when we’re all home, of course.” If he was still welcome.

He thought about what else he could say, looking back at his uncle, but he couldn’t find anything. Just looming, awkward silence.

“Of course,” Scrooge bit out. Donald shrugged it off, and turned to go back to the houseboat. It would have to be cleaned before they moved it, or things would get tossed around while it was in the air.

And he needed to *leave,* before he said something he regretted. The kids didn’t need to hear this. He’d managed to keep from having a fight, a real screaming raging *fight,* in front of them since they’d moved in, and he would not be changing that. Not today.

The air outside was cool and fresh; Donald felt it soak into him as he

walked, cooling the layer of sweat that had gathered during the brief… what had that been? An argument? Over what?

"Unca Donald?" Huey. Donald turned to look, and found all of his nephews, and his niece to boot, gathered behind him, like… well, like ducklings, Huey's hand hovering just above the hem of Donald's jacket.

"Can we look for the path that Uncle Gladstone found? That way we know where we're going later," Huey continued, and Donald felt the last of his anger melt. He smiled, ruffled Huey's hair around the hat.

"Sure, let's do that. Moving can wait a while," Donald agreed, and they turned towards the west side of the hill.

They searched silently; the woods were old growth trees, with minimal undergrowth in a lot of places, so whether a space counted as a path was up for debate. At one point Webby stumbled into him, grabbing his hand for balance. She didn't let go though, face turned away as though completely unaware of her tight grip. Donald smiled to himself, squeezed her hand once, and continued to walk.

After a few minutes of walking the ground began to dip down. The trees were further apart here, but the ground was rougher. Donald frowned, ready to call the hike off until they could get Gladstone to come around, when Dewey yelled.

"Found it! I think I can see the beach!"

What Dewey had found appeared to be a very old hiking trail, worn smooth over many years. It even had a few stone steps laid into the ground in steeper places. Donald guessed the previous owner lived somewhere else on Killmotor hill and wanted easier access to the

water, and might have been the one to build the pier as well.

He made note of the places that needed some upkeep, but despite the age everything was in good shape. Probably a side effect of Gladstone's luck, since it *was* his property.

Dewey leapt and tumbled over rocks and roots, but stayed close without being told. Huey was walking close, taking notes, and Louie stayed just on Donald's side, hands in his pockets and looking completely at ease. Webby hadn't left his side, and was swinging their arms back and forth while humming.

It was peaceful. Birds chirping and the growing sound of the waves. Donald couldn't believe they had never gone this route before, honestly; when he had lived at the Manor as a child they had begged Duckworth to take them to the beach (more Donald than Della, admittedly), or they biked down the path. As an adult he just drove to the public beach or Duckburg Harbor.

As the trees cleared, Donald could see the waters again. He hadn't noticed on his first visit that the land was on a fairly sheltered cove, with only mild waves lapping at the rocky beach. To the left and right were harsher rocks and cliff sides, as though someone had taken a spoon and scooped this little spot out, then smoothed a path to the top of the hill.

It was uncanny. Could Gladstone's luck really be good enough to find somewhere like this? How had Scrooge never found it?

Well, that was easier to answer; Scrooge was only interested in the ocean as far as it was useful. He would have never paid attention to the land around him unless there was treasure to be found.

“Woohoo, beach! Can we go swimming, please Unca Donald?” Dewey yelled more than asked, and Donald snorted a laugh. Webby tugged at his hand, grinning widely, but still not going off on her own. That was strange, but he would have to wait to figure it out.

“Go ahead, but stay close, okay? I want to be able to see you from the pier!” He called back, and Webby darted off to join him.

Sure, none of them had bathing suits or anything to change into, but walking home while dripping wet wouldn’t kill them. Besides, if it got late Donald would just call Launchpad to give them a ride, might as well get familiar with both routes here.

Huey walked off as well, but didn’t go to the water; he was still jotting down notes. Mapping the path, maybe?

Louie lingered by Donald’s side, looking around with some interest.

“Well? Does it meet your approval?” Donald asked, drawing his nephew’s gaze. Louie shrugged and nodded.

“Not much here, but it’s close enough to just drive and buy supplies. We could build a shed, store some beach chairs…” Louie trailed off thoughtfully, clearly plotting how to make the space more comfortable. Donald laughed.

“I think Gladstone was looking a bit bigger than a shed, but we’ll see what we can do in the meantime,” he offered, already considering how to set the beach up as an escape; some chairs, maybe a pavilion and a firepit.

Donald reminded himself it was Gladstone's choice, even if he suspected all he would have to do was ask, and walked to the pier, plopping down to let his feet hang over the water. Louie copied him.

"You sure you're okay with this?" Donald asked. Louie looked back at him.

"Yeah," he said, "But are you? Cause you seem nervous we're going to, I don't know, break down in tears."

Donald considered the question.

"I don't want you to think I'm abandoning you to the Manor," he finally said in a light tone. "Living in the same yard is one thing, but this is more like living down the street. It's just new, and I want to make sure you're all okay with it." Because if they weren't, if even one of his boys wasn't comfortable with the distance, he wouldn't move, but-

But he couldn't pretend he wasn't calmer just sitting near the water, and he couldn't deny that not living in a pool of all things would make him feel better. He was more than close enough for an emergency…

What about the Blot though, he thought. What if the Blot targeted Scrooge's collection of magical artifacts? Or Lena, or even Gladstone? He'd heard firsthand that the man was having issues getting fuel.

Was he being selfish?

"I mean, sure, yeah, I get that. It's different. But it's not really that far. Heck, we got here in like twenty minutes, and we spent half of that

looking for the right path," Louie mused, feet swinging in the air. Donald sat straighter to look at him.

"And you're allowed to do things for you, Unca Donald," Louie continued, quieter, and leaned against his side. Donald wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

Webby and Dewey were splashing in the water below them, and Huey was walking along the edge of the woods where it started to climb into cliffs, still taking notes.

"I'm your parent," Donald said, still looking at the beach, "You kids are always going to be my priority."

Louie let out an affirming noise.

"Then think about it this way: we get exercise walking back and forth, *and* we get to go sailing again. And I'm saying that! So you know it's totally fine, or I would never agree to physical activity."

Donald laughed, and squeezed Louie's shoulder.

"Well, I can't argue with that."

They sat in silence for a while, heels getting splashed occasionally by the waves below them.

"Betcha Dewey suggests putting in a waterslide before we leave," Louie said abruptly. Donald snorted, shaking his head.

“Two bucks says it’s a zipline,” he replied, and was rewarded with a delighted grin for playing along.

His phone chimed.

Bentina: I heard you’re moving to the beach; may I ask how to get there?

Ah. Donald had completely forgotten to speak to her before they trooped off; he had meant to talk to the adults of the house after the kids, depending on their answer. But Della, and then Scrooge- it had slipped his mind.

He texted back instructions to find the walking trail, and the road Gladstone had taken in for good measure, since he didn’t know if she was at the Manor.

Donald: does Launchpad know? He was the only one besides you I hadn’t talked to yet

Bentina: Yes, he overheard. I believe he went to fetch the crane for when you’re prepared

Donald waited for a moment, to see if she said anything else, then sent another message.

Donald: what do you think of it?

His phone was silent for a while, long enough for Louie to get up and move to the beach to lay down properly in a sunbeam. Dewey and Webby had left the water to explore the cove itself, but they were staying within his eyeline as requested.

Bentina: I was surprised, at first. But I do think it will be good for you, and the children as well. Having a retreat, and they all seemed rather excited to do more mundane activities like sailing.

Bentina: I will say I will miss your presence, but I will still see you at meals

Donald: you can always come visit; I'll be hurt if I don't have you over for dinner at some point

Donald: and a beach day sounds like a good way to relax on a hot day, don't you think?

Bentina: Well. I wouldn't say no to a lounge chair and a drink, if the opportunity arises

Donald smiled, and made vague plans for a beach party. It was still a bit early in the year to be in the water, if you weren't one of his crazy kids, but it would warm up in the next few months. That would give him time to get settled in, confirm exactly how easy going Gladstone was going to be.

A year ago he would never have considered Gladstone's offer, if he was being honest. Fethry using the other part of the pier was clearly an excuse, and it had apparently not occurred to his cousin they could both live on the land, so what was he even playing at? It wasn't for wealth, and Donald couldn't see an angle for bragging rights or a prank.

It wasn't the first time Gladstone had offered to help him financially, either out of guilt or some misplaced pity. It was the first time Donald had accepted anything that wasn't for the boys.

Was it just pity that he'd been living in the pool, or with Scrooge in general? Donald was only doing that for the boys' benefit, not because he needed to save money (Scrooge's bills were far larger than Donald's after all, even if he was just paying a portion for the shared expenses).

These were all things that he should have asked that morning, but… Gladstone had seemed eager, almost desperate for Donald to accept. Normally he was just smug, showing off what his luck had won for him. But this time he had just been excited, like he had been when they were kids, coming to Grandma's with free candy and toys to share.

Maybe that was it. He'd wanted to share this one, something they could all enjoy. Gladstone also liked fishing, he liked sitting on the beach and sipping a drink, and he probably wouldn't want to put the work in to maintain.

Donald took a long, deep breath, and let it go. Decided that just this once, he would let it go. Take the gift and not let his pride stop him. Just this once.

Bentina appeared on the beach a few hours later, with a picnic basket over her arm and Launchpad in tow. She smiled mildly while the kids cheered her arrival, setting up a blanket and food with military precision, while Launchpad enthusiastically complimented the area like Donald had personally designed it.

“Your sister and uncle have been fighting since you left,” Bentina murmured as an aside while the kids led Launchpad around to show him whatever rocks and plants they had found in their exploration.

“Do I want to ask what about?” Donald asked, but in reality he already knew; what else could it be?

“I imagine Della will fill you in. She was rather incensed, and insisted we come to join you while she ‘prepares.’ And no, I did not inquire what that would entail,” she added, when Donald’s eyes darted to her in fright.

Knowing Della, that could be anything from fireworks to a feast to celebrate. Or some kind of intervention to stop him; she had seemed positive earlier, but Della could be flighty sometimes.

Donald took a bite of his sandwich instead of worrying about it.

“What will you need, to complete the move? I imagine it won’t be as simple as dropping the boat in the water,” Bentina asked, and Donald latched onto the distraction.

“Water for the tanks, and fuel for the generator for the boat since I won’t be attached to your power grid. Internet for work, and I’ll need to get the bedroom situation set up,” he said, ticking off his fingers as he listed things, “Kitchen is already stocked and the boat is ready to go in the water, but I’ll need to tie some things down so they don’t break when we’re moving.”

Bentina nodded; a few strands of her hair had fallen from her bun and they fluttered around her face. It gave her a less severe appearance.

“Well, we will have to have some kind of house warming when you’re settled,” she declared. Donald had a moment to feel cold dread creep down his spine before his eardrums blew from a high pitched shriek.

“A *party?!* Can I help plan it? Can we invite Lena and Violet, and-” Webby reached the picnic blanket fast enough to leave a dust trail, jabbering a mile a minute, and slammed into Donald’s side like a cannonball. He caught her and tumbled into the ground with a huff.

“-and can we have fancy hors d'oeuvres and sip on wine, well not me but you guys-”

“I expected this from Huey,” Donald said conversationally to Bentina over Webby’s head, since she was beyond hearing him anyway, and Bentina laughed.

“-and maybe we can even dance!”

“Webby,” Donald tried, but she was gone, still spouting ideas and vibrating as she stared at him, mouth moving a mile a minute.

He let her ramble, glancing around to find the boys, who were approaching now at a slower pace, Launchpad trailing behind.

“Want to help me plan a housewarming?” He asked, as Webby paused to take a breath.

Now he got Huey’s excited reaction. With bonus Dewey and Launchpad.

He texted Gladstone before he could forget; whether it was an invitation or a warning was up for debate.

Moving Day

Della was waiting on the deck of the houseboat when Donald got back, kids safely off to their rooms to plan the crazy beach party that the housewarming (though Dewey argued it should be a boat warming, and Huey insisted it was a beach warming since the houseboat wasn't actually new) had become.

She looked up when he arrived, wearing a tentative grin that he returned.

"Sounds like you guys had a good time at the beach! You'll have to show me where the trail is next time," she started, and Donald nodded, leading them both below deck.

There were a number of bland shopping bags sitting innocently on the table, piled and heaped with no real thought; he eyed them suspiciously.

"So! Since you're moving, kinda, I wanted to help you get set up!" Della continued cheerfully, gesturing towards the bags.

"Della, I've lived in the houseboat for years, I don't need anything," Donald protested immediately, trying to see what was in the bags without getting any closer. He had *no* idea what Della would think he needed to 'set up.'

"I mean, yeah, duh, but this is the first time you'll have a yard! Beach, whatever. And you have, like, no alcohol in your house, cause I looked, okay, and I get it, kids, but still!" Donald stared at her, nonplussed.

“It’s not really my beach,” he pointed out. “And I have some rum, it’s just hidden, because. Kids.”

“What!” Della demanded, whirling to stare at him. “Where? We need to drink together, we haven’t done that once since I got back!”

He would never tell her where he kept his liquor. Della probably hadn’t had a drink since she got back from the moon, her tolerance had to be shot.

“Anyway,” Della continued, when he didn’t say anything, “I just got you some stuff I thought you could use while you’re so very far away. You can’t open it yet though! After you move, which…” She trailed off, looking around.

“When are you doing that? Do you need help?” She looked like she was itching to move things, to have the task done.

“Why? Eager to get rid of me?”

Della scoffed, and her shoulders drooped for a moment before she caught herself. Her hands were jittery.

“Complete opposite, if I’m being honest, but I get why *you* want to do it. And you’re just down the hill, not in the harbor, or back in New Quackmore,” Della answered breezily, waving a hand.

“Or back in the Navy,” Donald added absently, and got a decisive nod in return.

“Exactly! So if you want to be just down the hill, I’ll definitely help you do that instead of one of those places,” Della declared, and looked around again.

She was wound tight today, Donald realized, probably because of fighting with Scrooge. Maybe partially left over from their weather adventure too.

Or because he was the one leaving, this time.

“I need to get everything delicate packed away, most of this stuff has boxes or bins to go into for traveling,” he finally said.

“Great! Let’s get started!”

Packing was slow. The photos needed to be carefully wrapped to keep them from breaking, and Della had questions about all of them. Donald was always happy to talk about the boys, so they filled the afternoon with Huey joining the football team as the waterboy, and Dewey trying out for a musical, Louie starting a lemonade stand while the pier had been under construction and making a fortune from the construction workers.

Once the photos were packed, they went to the kitchen and wrapped up the breakable dishes. The bags that Della had brought were stowed away under the table to limit how much they moved around. The boys room was already clean, the spare rooms and Storkules’ previous room only taking a few minutes each to look over and approve. Donald insisted on doing his own bedroom, so Della looked over the bathroom.

“So, what did you and Scrooge argue about?” Donald called down the hall as he worked, using the physical distance to, hopefully, make the

conversation more casual. “Bentina mentioned it when she dropped by.”

“Ugh, don’t get me *started!* How is he so old and still terrible at using words!” Della hollered back, unbothered by how loud she was.

“I got on his case for being such a jerk about you moving *down the hill,* and what is his deal even, I don’t understand him, and he just huffed that he didn’t want you to move! How was anyone supposed to get that from what he said!”

Donald paused in packing up his clothing. Scrooge wanted him to stay?

“And I said, well why didn’t you say *that,* do you know what he said to me? Huh?” Della continued ranting. Donald called back a ‘no,’ but he probably didn’t have to, Della was on a roll.

“He said ‘well of course he knows that, he’s just being petty!’ Petty! About what?! Have you two fought lately or something?”

“We’ve barely spoken in weeks,” Donald replied honestly, because outside of their brief encounter in the kitchen the other day, he didn’t think he’d said more than a grunted greeting since the Blot’s escape.

“See, that’s what I thought! But he wouldn’t say what you would be petty about, cause it doesn’t exist, probably, so I just told him to figure out how to talk like an adult and went shopping.”

It took Donald a moment to realize she was done talking.

“I didn’t think he liked me living in his pool, he complains about it enough,” Donald admitted, latching the last of the storage bins and sliding it into the closet.

“You know how he is, he’s allergic to actually saying what he means. Maybe he just wanted you to move into the Manor,” Della suggested; Donald stifled a snort of sarcastic laughter as he leaned on the bathroom doorway.

“Last time I lived in the Manor, I was sixteen and we were fighting constantly. Can’t imagine why he would want more of that,” Donald pointed out, and Della nodded ruefully, getting up and latching the cabinet securely.

“Yeah, we probably don’t want a repeat of that. Pretty sure I went deaf for a few months at the end there. Still, that’s what he said, and now he’s sulking in his office that he didn’t get what he wanted, so that’ll be fun later,” she complained, leaning against the sink and rubbing her eyes. Donald winced; no matter that all three of them had nasty tempers at times, Della was usually the one fixing things between Donald and Scrooge.

“Sorry about that,” he offered, but she waved him off.

“Don’t even worry about it. So, is that… it?” She asked, and looked hesitant for the first time. Like it had set in just at that moment that he was moving.

“Yeah, that’s everything,” Donald said briskly, casual, and gestured towards the kitchen. “Want to join me moving it? We can have dinner.” Della lit up.

“Yes, Donald dinner! Can I make a request?”

“Only if I already have the ingredients, I’m not going shopping tonight.”

Donald drove ahead of Launchpad’s crane, leading the way to the cove yet again. Della was taking the walking path so she could get used to it, so Donald alone parked his car in the same place Gladstone had (and had that only been this morning that he had come here?), and guided the houseboat into the water.

Tying it to the pier felt like coming home in a way Donald couldn’t put into words. The houseboat rocked in the gentle waves.

He would have to run into town in the morning to get fuel and water, but he was set at least for the next few days.

“So everything looks great!” Launchpad said, leaning against the crane with a broad grin. “Nice to be back on the water, I bet!”

“You have no idea,” Donald replied, breathing in the salt and trying to toss away the lingering dread from Scrooge and whatever his deal was. If he wanted Donald in the *Manor,* he should say so!

Not that Donald would move in, but at least he could talk to him about it instead of what had happened earlier today.

“I got an ear infection once, couldn’t fly for weeks until it cleared up,” Launchpad told him cheerfully. “I felt like I was about to bounce

straight out of my feathers by the end of it!"

Donald snorted a sympathetic laugh, shaking his head.

"You're still welcome to come by whenever you need," Donald said, turning to look at his much taller friend. Launchpad glanced back, an easy smile on his face.

"Thanks, DD. Really appreciate that," he told him. His shoulders were loose, calm. Donald envied him his ease; he felt like he was hopping from crisis to crisis lately. Who knew his move to SHUSH would turn into this?

Well. The Blot would have escaped either way. But without Donald there, would they have realized he was missing as fast as they had? Or would he still be moving under the radar?

"How's your caped friend?" He asked, thinking about how Darkwing's investigation had made the way for finding the Blot's escape. Launchpad sighed, sounding fond and worried all at once.

"He's busy. Which is good! Saving people, doing heroic deeds. I guess you might know about his case…?" He trailed off so tentatively that Donald didn't realize for a moment he was waiting for a response.

He wasn't *surprised* that Launchpad knew about the Blot. At least some portion of it. They hadn't demanded any kind of secrecy, after all, and by all accounts Launchpad was his partner. He *was* surprised that he hadn't mentioned LP was in the loop at any point. It would have been good to know!

“Yeah,” he finally whispered. “Yeah, I know what the case is.”

“Right! Yeah, I bet, heh…” Launchpad laughed, awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s just- this is a big deal, you know?”

Donald nodded. He knew.

“So anyway, busy! Hard to find time to do much, but Mr. McD keeps me pretty busy anyway, so it’s not a huge deal. Well, driving around anyway, Della does most of the flying lately. But she lets me fly sometimes!” Launchpad continued cheerily, like he wasn’t stabbing Donald in the heart with that admission.

The family *loved* Launchpad, he was a part of the family. But with Della handling a lot of the flying now, and LP’s boyfriend and hero friend living in St. Canard, he was clearly being pulled in two directions. And Scrooge was still his *boss,* for all that he was also family. If Scrooge called, LP would come, and with Darkwing so busy…

He opened his mouth, to say what he didn’t quite know, but Launchpad glanced at his watch and moved to get back in the crane.

“Got a date with Drake, have fun boat moving!” He called as he started the engine, and Donald had to hop out of the way before he was run over.

“Say hi to Drake for me!” He called, but doubted LP would hear *or* understand him over the engine. Sure enough, Launchpad only shook his head and continued on, looking excited as he drove over the beach back to the dirt road.

Donald sighed, leaning against the pier. He wished there was some easy solution to Launchpad's problem (even if the other bird hadn't fully acknowledged the issue). But he couldn't make their work schedules match, and he couldn't move St. Canard closer.

He was abruptly glad he hadn't been an active hero while dating José and Panchito. He couldn't imagine trying to coordinate their schedules while working his night gig.

Della finally trotted down the pier, hauling yet another bag, this one clearly from the liquor store, and Donald rolled his eyes.

"Come on, we're doing this! Kids are having a slumber party at the Manor, so it's all pizza and horror movies for them, and a free night for us!" She didn't let him argue, barging onto the boat and into the kitchen.

He would have to go through everything in the morning to put things away, and he wanted to get the bedrooms set up for the kids; there were so many more of them now. But for now, he followed Della into the kitchen to make them dinner.

While he was making up potato soup (Grandma Elvira's recipe), Della slid the beer she had brought into the fridge, setting a bottle of rum on the counter. It was a brand that Donald had liked back in college, and he smiled at the fact that she remembered. Then she shoved the other bags at him one at a time, grinning wildly at him as he grumbled and groaned and pulled the first one towards him.

Inside the first few bags was, unsurprisingly, beach gear. Some frisbees, a rolled up volleyball net that he would still need the frame

for, some new towels and sunglasses. It was like Della had grabbed one of everything that was in the beach section of the store, but he thanked her anyway. Having extra towels and whatnot wasn't a bad thing, given how their family had grown.

It was how Della was, leaping into things 100%. She'd decided to support him moving, so she wanted to make sure he was prepared, no matter that he didn't need anything.

He did decide to annoy her by putting the new things away as they went, while Della scowled impatiently at him.

The next bag held a new, overly stocked first aid kit, which would be excessive if he was anyone else. That got carefully tucked into the bathroom, then he detoured into checking on the soup.

"Don, come *on!*"

The last few had the distinctly soft appearance of clothing, and he eyed his sister with extreme doubt as he reached inside. Della stuck out her tongue at him.

The first shirt he pulled out was a midnight blue, with iridescent buttons. He stopped, running his hands along the fabric. It was nice, soft, similar to the shirt he'd worn to the club the other day. He didn't look up at Della's no-doubt smug expression, and kept digging.

There were a few other button downs, in black and blue and one in a creamy off-white that he was certain he would stain if he ever wore it. Then there was a flannel, almost identical to the ones he had worn in college, which seemed to be a theme today.

A few more flannels, one heavy black jacket, and finally a small pile of plain t-shirts. None of the logos and jokes he would have picked as a teen, thankfully.

“Della, you do know I can buy my own clothes?” Donald said sarcastically, but he was already running his hands over the pile again.

“Yeah, and you always get the cheapest thing on the rack. Or wear your old uniforms because, and I quote ‘they still fit, and they're free!’ This way you can have nice things *and* you don’t have to buy them!” When Donald continued giving her a dark look, she blew a raspberry at him.

“Call it birthday gifts for the last eleven years, then!” She insisted. “I’m not taking them back either way, so you’ll have to suck it up.”

Today seemed the day for gifts he wouldn’t normally accept, Donald mused.

“Does that mean I owe you gifts for the last few years?” He asked, and Della rolled her eyes at him.

“Nah, we’ll call it even on that. Just take the gift and make me dinner,” she demanded, so Donald took the clothes and put them away.

It felt silly, having his sister filling his wardrobe. Like he was a child.

On the other hand, it was nice that she had thought of him and wanted him to have new clothes. Donald rarely bought anything for

himself that wasn't a necessity for work or because something had been destroyed. And she had been surprisingly thoughtful, getting things she clearly thought he would like wearing instead of things she thought were funny or what she would personally wear.

As he put the clothes away, he realized how bare his closet was; he'd been running low on his old uniform shirts for a while, but it didn't really dawn on him until the new clothes were being put away.

Alright, Della had good timing. Even if she was probably thinking of it as Donald getting a new lease on life, moving out and getting new clothes.

"So, I'm thinking we install a zipline for coming down the hill," Della suggested when he walked back in, and Donald let out a laugh.

"We'd have to knock down some trees," he pointed out reasonably.

"That's not a no~" Della sang back at him.

And she was right, it wasn't.

Drinking beers on the deck of the houseboat felt so familiar he ached, no matter that they had never been on his boat together before the Spear of Selene. Della told him about some out there date ideas she wanted to ask Penumbra on, but didn't think that her friend would understand the subtext of.

“It’s not like the Moonlanders don’t have dating, it’s more like she personally isn’t all that into it? But I don’t know how to ask if she’s asexual, cause Moonlanders might not even know the term, and Penny gets frustrated when I try to explain earth stuff to her sometimes,” she explained, waving her arms around and splashing a bit of beer onto her arm. Donald drew back a bit, nursing his own.

“You could just ask what she would consider a fun romantic date and use that idea,” Donald offered. Della pouted.

“I actually tried that, but I guess she just told me what most Moonlanders would do for a date, which is a nice walk out on the dunes, and when I invited her for a walk she asked where we were going to go, and honestly a walk sounded *boring,* so I said we were going to explore instead, and it ended up being a hiking trip.”

Donald winced.

“I guess find something you both enjoy and have fun. Or just tell her you want to take her on a date,” he added. Della nodded, looking morose. Though that could be the beer; she had not fully retained her alcohol tolerance and was already tipsy. At least he had a bed she could crash on if she couldn’t make it up the hill.

“I want her to be my friend more than I want to date her, and I’m worried that she won’t be interested and it’ll make things awkward,” she whined into her beer.

Donald nodded in agreement. Realizing he had crushes on not one, but both of his fellow Caballeros back in the day had filled him with the same fear. It had worked out eventually, but until that point he had been several levels of terrified that something would fall apart. Like so many things around Donald did.

“She likes fighting, maybe she’d like to spar?” Donald offered instead of commenting on the other point, and Della gave him a watery grin.

“Sure, I’ll try that. When I want my ass kicked. She’s twice my size!” Then her eyes unfocused a bit and her grin widened. Donald shook his head and looked away, filing that under things he didn’t want to know.

The moon was high above them, glowing white and nearly full. Donald looked up at it, thinking about Della and the Spear, and how if he’d known she was so close he could have just. Gone and brought her home. She could have been home in an afternoon, if he’d considered that she might be that close.

But he’d been too caught up in rage and in the triplets, and he selfishly thought that Scrooge would find her if there was anything to find. That she had blasted out into the depths of space, a needle tossed into the hayfield, not even the luckiest duck on Earth capable of guessing correctly. And he would know, since the luckiest duck (half goose) had tried. Apparently the moon had never been considered. Or maybe Gladstone’s luck didn’t extend that far out.

Speaking of that…

“Donaldo! Dells! What a surprise!” Gladstone called as he walked up, carrying a case of his preferred cider and grinning widely at them both. Donald had kept his end of the deal and texted him that they were sharing a few drinks on the deck if he wanted to join them; apparently it had been well received.

Donald gestured vaguely at the railing they were both sitting against.

“Have a seat, we’re plotting how to get Della a date,” he said cheerfully, dodging a swipe from his twin with ease. She scowled at him, while Gladstone warily sat down on Donald’s other side, cracking a drink as he did.

“Nooo, let’s talk about you instead!” She crowed. Donald paused, but she was pointing at Gladstone, eyes crossed slightly to look at her finger. He shrugged, deceptively casual, and took a drink.

“Not much to tell. If I want a date, I come across a nice person that happens to be free. Nothing to it,” he said airily. Donald shook his head and leaned back against the railing, but Della made an irritated noise and leaned over to better glare at their cousin.

“That works for a *first* date,” she said, more sober than she’d been a few moments ago, “what about a second one? Huh?”

“He dated Daisy for a bit,” Donald added innocently, earning him an offended gasp.

“He dated your *ex?”* Della asked, a mix of offended and delighted. Gladstone let out a strangled groan.

“Why did you tell her that, I thought you liked me,” Glad whined, leaning against Donald’s shoulder and drinking more of his cider. Donald shrugged, purposely bumping Gladstone in the cheek.

“Oops?”

“Wait, was it after you broke up for good, or during one of your breaks, or was it before you met? You have to tell me now!”

“During a break,” Donald told her, over Gladstone’s protests. Her eyes were lit up with the prospect of getting interesting gossip, and Donald felt oddly accommodating for once. “I don’t know if she knew we were related at the time though. Gladstone was pretty surprised when he found out.”

“God Don, why would you bring that up?” Gladstone groaned, flopping entirely into his lap. How he planned to drink was unclear; Donald expected to end up covered with both their drinks before the end of the night.

“Well, have you dated anyone since? Besides a first meet-cute, I mean,” Donald asked casually, looking down at Gladstone’s blushing face. From here it was clear his hair chalk was rubbing off, revealing golden curls underneath.

Gladstone didn’t reply for a long time.

“A lot of people are just interested in the luck thing,” he finally said. “Cause if I’m dating someone I can get us into all kinds of nice restaurants, romantic cruises and concerts, the works. One of the few times that my luck really works for someone else, you know? So it’s harder to tell if they’re genuine,” he finally admitted, then tilted his beak to take a long drink of cider, managing not to choke.

Donald glanced at Della, who looked devastated at that reveal.

“You’ll find someone who isn’t like that, Gladstone,” she told him earnestly, leaning forward to look him in the eye. “I swear. Oh! Maybe we can help! I bet we can find someone who’s not in it for the fancy dates!” She looked back at Donald as she spoke, determined and a bit demented. Donald glanced at his cousin, but Glad wasn’t looking at

him anymore, staring instead over the other side of the boat. He didn't reply.

"Let's leave the schemes for later, Dell, it's late," Donald finally said in answer, and Della fell back against the railing with a slight pout, and she finished her beer in a decidedly sulky manner.

"We should get Fethry here," she declared after a minute of silence. Donald nodded, and Gladstone shifted in his lap to look back up at the both.

"I told him he could bring Mitzy here whenever he comes back to Duckburg," he said, gesturing towards the otherwise unoccupied pier. "Don't know where exactly he is right now though, he's wandering around researching for a project on krill."

"Get Donald to bake Grandma's pecan pie, that'll summon him in a flash."

"Why do I always have to cook?"

"Cause Della refuses to follow a recipe and experiments too much."

"And cooking would ruin Gladstone's suit."

Agent Duckling: ACQUIRED

Donald would swear, if asked later, that he saw more of his family now that he was docked at the pier than when he'd been in the Manor pool. It seemed like everyday he got home from work one of the kids was there, or showed up just after he did. Huey claimed it was calmer here to work on his studies, plopping himself at the kitchen table with a pile of books and notes. Louie usually napped in a hammock strung up on shore between a few convenient trees, or made his way to the boat to watch Ottoman Empire on his phone.

Webby and Dewey came together to swing from the trees or swim; both came on their own for dance lessons. Dewey insisted he wanted to learn how to do swing dancing, but Donald would bet he mostly wanted to learn how to be tossed in the air. Either way, he used an off-afternoon to clear a decent space on the ground, planning to lay something more permanent later.

He had suggested going to the Manor's ballroom, like they had before, but for whatever reason the pair insisted that they wanted to do so at the beach.

Donald concluded it was mostly the novelty and let it go, but made sure he still ate at the Manor if he wasn't cooking, if only to make sure that Scrooge didn't conclude he was trying to steal the kids. They hadn't spoken directly since the argument, just around each other, but at least they weren't screaming instead.

Even Gladstone was usually around. Apparently he'd lucked into a contractor who was happy to build him a place on the beach, so whenever Donald got home there was a growing house in the shade, with his cousin lounging on the beach and waving a hello. He was staying at a hotel, technically, but only left just before dinner, and arrived the next morning just before Donald left for work.

He'd warned Gladstone he wasn't making him breakfast, but he'd been waved off. Half the time Glad arrived *with* food, coffee and a bagel from a coffee shop on the way, and he left without demanding much conversation. Donald felt distinctly bribed, but couldn't figure out what the goal was. For now he took the pick-me-up and went to work.

The final lesson he'd assigned to his students was to steal something recognizable from somewhere in SHUSH headquarters and bring it to their classroom. Most of them had already been approved for field missions as junior agents, but every one of them came to the last class anyway.

Which was good; Donald had bought pizza, and he didn't want to bring it home.

The lesson was more of a game than anything; people brought in all manner of odd objects, including the room number from their first classroom, the coffee pot from the main breakroom, one of the shoes from the lost and found ("Every one of you recognized it! It counts!"), and a box of 'pens' from Equipment (they did write, but were also listening devices).

330 brought in Donald's own Senior Agent sign from the door of his office; Donald hadn't been in his office in days, and genuinely had no idea how long it had been missing.

Junior agents were assigned out to a team or to a Senior agent after completing training, so after they'd gone through everyone's thefts (and returned the coffee pot before there was a riot), Donald began handing out assignments. He hadn't been a part of the assignments, to avoid favoritism, but he did know some of his junior agents had already been scoped out during training, and had an inkling where a few were headed.

The room erupted into the loudest silence Donald had ever heard, while they each opened their envelopes and read the results. A few people left the room to review, Donald assuring them they didn't have to tell anyone where they had been assigned.

It was a bittersweet moment for him. He knew his students were ready to go, and SHUSH needed them. The world needed them, not to be overly dramatic about it. But with the Blot, with FOWL… so help him, he didn't want people to be in danger.

For a moment, he could see the flaring light of an explosion, the burn of decayed magic, before he cleared his head.

"Er, Agent Double Duck? Do you know where we each were assigned?" Donald glanced up at 330, frowning. 330 was staring at his envelope like it was in code.

"No, I wasn't privy to it. Why, did you get a surprise?" He asked. While he would deny it, 330 was one of his favorite students; the chicken was bright and eager, and he would be a great agent. If he'd gotten a rotten assignment, Donald would be highly tempted to pull some strings.

"You could say that," 330 said, and he timidly handed over his letter.

Donadl couldn't rightly say what he had expected, but 'Assigned junior partner to Agent DD' was not it. He stared at it for a long time, waiting for his eyes to adjust, to reveal it was Agent D0 or something, but the wording stayed the same. Did that count as a bad assignment?

"Ah," he croaked, utterly lost. A few agents were staring now, clearly curious. Donald handed the letter back.

“Let’s talk about that one later. Say, while you’re returning my office sign?” Donald managed, and got a sheepish grin back.

Four of his agents had been assigned to the Cryptanalysis team; they left immediately to start on their first mission, which Donald would bet money was the coded list from the auction. It was proving harder to crack than expected. Last Donald had heard, the theory was the different names might be in different codes altogether. Unexpectedly elaborate for their host, so much so that a few agents had been assigned to tracking him and his assistant back down to investigate further.

It was yet another avenue that used resources and may lead nowhere; they didn’t even know if it would lead them to the Blot, to the people that broke him out of prison, or nowhere at all. The nature of SHUSH investigations was that a lot of work was ruling things out and spending a lot of time on things they couldn’t use, just to find the one piece that got them answers. But this, at least, would get them other criminals when it was cracked.

One by one the other junior agents left, to their new teams or to pack up their things to fly out on mission. 720 grinned widely at Donald as she left; she’d been assigned to a Tokyolk infiltration mission with her new team.

When it was just him, 330, and the empty room, Donald couldn’t stall any longer, so he finished tidying up and led the way to his office. 330 was quiet, but Donald couldn’t get a read on if he was nervous, disappointed, or something else.

330 fixed the office sign while Donald swept his office for bugs. He did find one of the listening pens, which he tossed into an empty room down the hall, but that was likely more as a joke from one of his prior students than anything.

“Sir?”

Donald leveled 330 a bland look at the title.

“Double Duck, sorry. I guess they didn’t ask you?” 330 asked, sitting down gingerly. Donald shook his head.

“Nope. With your class done with training I suppose I’m going back on active duty, but it hasn't come up yet.” Donald had actually expected to get folded into the training schedule permanently, but either way he hadn’t been informed of any changes.

330 went silent, and Donald had no idea how to address the issue, so he took the moment to check his email, hoping there was some kind of explanation.

There was one, in a way: he’d been assigned to investigate any potential link between FOWL and the Blot. Ravenson had apparently decided to make him put his money where his mouth was. Included in the vague mission details was a budget that was clearly designed for two agents.

“Alright, what do you know about the Phantom Blot?” Donald asked into the silence, and 330 jumped a bit.

“Er- he was a convicted terrorist that recently broke out of prison. Used magic to power fuel cells and other inventions; initial goal some kind of world domination goal, current goals and allies unknown,” 330 recited, sounding just as iffy about magic as everyone that Donald had brought into this investigation. Great, another person to educate.

“Good. What do you know about FOWL?”

If 330 had been stiff before, now he could have been carved from stone. His eyes went hard.

“The Fiendish Organization for World Larceny. They've got fingers in most aspects of organized crime. No long term or permanent goal is known, but their name implies the intention to just gain money and power.” He paused, chewing over his words. “Is there a connection I should be aware of?”

“That remains to be seen,” Donald said, and leaned forward to lean on his desk. “I’ve been assigned to investigate if they have anything to do with the Blot’s breakout or current movements. Looks like you’re cutting your teeth on a big one. Are you prepared for that, Agent 330?”

330 considered him for a moment, and took a deep breath, before giving him a dark grin.

“When do we start?”

For a brief moment, Donald would swear he was looking at a different face bathed in green, in a different place and time. The same grim determination to make sure that nobody else would be hurt on their watch.

Then the image faded, and he was shaking 330’s hand over the desk, just once, and nodded.

“We start today. Glad to have you.”

330’s small speech had been the end of his knowledge of the Blot, though he knew more about FOWL, so Donald sent him to study both files and come back with any immediate insights. It would likely take a few days for him to be done, given the volume of information, so Donald took the opportunity to find the Director in her office.

“You could have warned me,” he said without preamble as he walked in. Ravenson eyed him over her paperwork. She didn’t bother asking what he meant.

“It was your hunch, and you both had good rapport previously. Do you have any concerns?” She asked, ignoring his statement entirely. Donald surmised it was some new test, either for him or 330, but couldn’t shake the thought that she had just forgotten and was bluffing.

“He’s only been in the field with me, it might stunt him to only work with one agent for so long,” Donald pointed out. Ravenson smiled in a way that made it seem like she was laughing at him.

“I trust that if he can keep up with you, he will hardly struggle with anyone else. Once your mission has been completed, in whatever capacity that is, we’ll re-evaluate. Anything else?” Donald frowned at her statement, but let it go.

“Am I still doing training courses? 330 hardly needs to be demoted to a teaching assistant.” Ravenson shook her head.

“Our next group of trainees are still in the early stages, and I would

prefer you work with our seasoned trainees before they head into field work. Your suggestions have been received, and are being implemented," she added, which was good news. Donald had been highly concerned that practical methods had been largely skipped with his first group; who didn't teach hand signals in case your comms went out?

Feeling like he had learned nothing, Donald left shortly afterwards, assuring Ravenson that he would keep her in the loop. He didn't know if she thought he was on the right track and just didn't have the personnel to assign out without more proof, or if she just wanted to keep him busy until the next class was ready. Getting a trainee agent made him lean towards her believing him…

Unless 330 was intended to watch him, to report back on Double Duck to Ravenson. He'd gotten the impression she knew he wasn't saying everything about the Blot, or the magic angle. But if that was her goal, this was a fairly unsubtle method of watching him.

Well, he'd have to watch 330 for anything unusual, and in the meantime get someone in to teach the other agents about magic so they had that resource. Ravenson being suspicious of him was something he could worry about when the Blot was back in prison.

Unbidden, he remembered his trainees 'killing' each other, each suspecting the other was a counteragent.

Alright, something he should worry about sooner rather than later, but he couldn't do anything about it right now unless he was willing to let SHUSH know a whole lot more about his abilities than they already did.

His phone chimed as he got back to his office.

José: are you free on Friday afternoon?

Panchito: we are in need of a hand with something!

Donald: what do you need?

It couldn't be what he was thinking, right? Surely they still had work to do, it wasn't time yet…

José: we need you to pick up something at the airport at 4 <3

Panchito: two somethings!

Donald: YOURE COMING TO DUCKBURG???

Panchito: you knew this!

José: we are! We must beg a ride to the cabana from our dearest Donald, if you will be free?

Donald: of course I will be! I can't wait to see you both!

He was never going to survive the week.

Evening brought him to the Money Bin, going straight to the basement lab levels.

Fenton met him at the door, looking the same mix of exhausted and wired that Gyro practically invented, taking his hand and leading him to a workbench with a garbled greeting.

“We’ve got a prototype magic detector!” He explained enthusiastically, gesturing to a strange object on the table. It looked like it had started life as a tablet, then mutated with a pile of wires and sensors. Donald blinked at it, then at Fenton.

“I thought Gyro didn’t believe in magic?” He asked, then suppressed a wince. It had been PK that had been told that, not Donald!

Thankfully Fenton was either too distracted to notice, or assumed Donald had been told, since he didn’t even acknowledge the slip.

“Dr. Gearloose is still less than convinced, but we’re both certain that this should detect the same energy that came from the power cells that I- that Gizmoduck was blasted by!” Fenton told him, gesturing towards it again.

“But, we need to start it in a place completely clean of that energy, which is a bit stressful since we don’t really know what it is, and if we don’t get a clear space to calibrate it then it won’t work correctly.” Which was why Darkwing had asked PK to ask Donald for a hand with it, since Paperinik had told Darkwing that Donald understood some of it. And Paperinik’s magic expert wasn’t currently available, so Donald was the best option they had.

Keeping track of all of this was becoming a nuisance, Donald mused. And he was still concerned about this thing existing, but Gyro needed

a way to create a shield for Gizmoduck, and to do that he needed clear data of what he was trying to defend against.

"There's a room in the Archives that's magic neutral; it's meant for looking at cursed artifacts without causing damage to the building, but you should be able to calibrate it there," Donald replied. Fenton blinked at him.

"Really? Just like that?"

"Sure, I'll let you in. There are a few magical artifacts in the building we can test it on later, that way we know for sure it worked," he offered.

So they trooped upstairs, and Donald let Fenton into the correct room after a brief discussion with Quackfaster. She was of the opinion that Donald needed to stay with his 'guest' at all times, Donald was of the secret opinion that him being in the room with the sensor would also ruin the calibration. Out loud he just said he needed to go to the Bin, and wasn't she more than capable of keeping Fenton in her sights until he was done?

Which bruised her ego enough that she agreed, so he was free to go upstairs to the Bin and find something suitable for the test. It just needed to be a confirmed magical item, one that he could show had mystical properties to Fenton so he could trust the results. Easy.

Except as he walked into Scrooge's office to get to the vault, he was halted by a voice.

"Donald? What are ye doing here?" Scrooge peered at him through the doors of the meeting room, frowning. Donald stopped, and debated running for one insane moment before he went into the conference

room.

“Isn’t it late for you to still be here?” He asked, looking around. The room was empty outside of the two of them, covered in spreadsheets and reports. Scrooge scoffed and shook a hand.

“Quarterly budget meeting with the board is running long, per the usual. The buzzards are off getting coffee and more reports printed.” Scrooge said with a scowl.

“Ah.”

Scrooge eyed him; it wasn’t suspicious, surprisingly, nor angry, just confused.

“You don’t usually come to the Bin,” he observed, which was true. Donald had few reasons to visit, and fewer reasons to come to the top floors.

“Fenton and Gyro are making a magical energy detector, and I offered to grab something from the vault to test it on, since those things aren’t as dangerous as the ones at the Manor,” he said honestly. It crossed his mind to lie, but only for a moment. He didn’t need to lie just to avoid talking to his uncle, no matter that they had fought every time they’d talked recently.

“Magical energy? Why are they looking into that of all things?” Scrooge asked, going from confused to honestly baffled. Donald blinked at him; did he not know? But no, of course he wouldn’t. Who would have told him?

But why? Why did it always fall on Donald to give people bad news?

“The Phantom Blot escaped prison, Scrooge,” he said in a low voice, and watched distress and raw fear run across Scrooge’s face for just a moment, the expression so honestly foreign that Donald half-thought he had imagined it.

“You’re certain?” He asked, looking hopeful and hopeless all in one. Donald nodded, and Scrooge deflated, slumping in his chair.

“They’re keeping it under wraps for now, but Paperinik was already involved,” he explained. Scrooge nodded, staring into the middle distance.

Scrooge hadn’t been involved with the case directly, the Blot hadn’t wanted to get the kind of attention that attacking Scrooge McDuck would bring. But he’d offered help to the victims afterwards, no matter that he wasn’t fond of magic users in general. Money for treatments, his huge array of artifacts. Nothing in his vast collection had been useful.

Donald had thought once, in a darker moment, that it was probably the first time that Scrooge hadn’t been able to use his resources to do what he wanted. After Della, he’d never let himself think that again.

“You already have complete access to the Bin, but if there’s anything else you can use, you tell me. Or have one of those heroes ask me, lord knows there’s a pile of them now,” Scrooge blustered, trying to pull himself back together by sheer force of will.

Donald nodded at the first point. His keys to the Bin were the one thing about his old life that he hadn’t left behind. It was only for emergencies, but sending it back to Scrooge had felt like something he

could never take back, and he'd never been able to do more than take the key out before he abandoned the thought.

"I need something obviously magic; Gyro and Fenton aren't exactly willing to believe in it wholesale, and something obvious would help." Scrooge shook his head in disbelief.

"Didn't they both help with the Magica nonsense?" he asked, and Donald could only shrug. Some people were willing to believe without proof, others wouldn't believe no matter what they saw. He hoped Fenton was closer to the middle, he had his doubts about Gyro ever really believing in magic.

"Well, I do have that prediction scroll we picked up, that ought to work?" Scrooge offered, pulling himself to his feet. Donald trailed after him.

"You brought that *here?* " he asked, lost. Scrooge had told him it was all but worthless, only notable because…

Because FOWL had been after it.

"Aye, well, I wanted to mess with it a touch more, and the Bin is more secure than the Manor from curious ducklings," Scrooge said airily. Donald raised a brow.

"Curious ducklings?" He asked, and Scrooge made an odd face, like he'd been caught doing something embarrassing, but he played it off.

"Well, you had a good point about the kids and not asking certain questions," he said, looking pained to admit Donald was right.

“Figured I’d keep it away for a bit, until they forgot about it, then get it put away. Should be here somewhere.” So saying, he started digging in his desk drawers, which were stuffed with contracts and financial reports. Donald didn’t remember him being so messy, but it had been a long time since he’d been here.

Except for the fight with Magica’s shadow army, but he hadn’t exactly been looking around at the office changes that day.

“Mr. McDuck, we need to continue our meeting,” Bradford Buzzard snapped from the conference room doors, tapping his foot. His arms were full of paperwork, which made Scrooge wince.

“Blast it, just a minute. Need to find a scroll,” he grumbled, rummaging in another drawer with a scowl. Bradford didn’t look impressed.

“I’m sure whatever expensive adventure your nephew wants to go on can wait,” he sniped.

“Donald, wanting to adventure? Sure, when pigs fly,” Scrooge snorted to himself, while Donald rubbed the back of his neck, feeling almost embarrassed. He knew that was ridiculous, Scrooge was completely correct that Donald wasn’t the one to propose adventures, but it hurt, somehow, hearing it said like that.

He shoved the feeling down and glanced at Bradford, who was still glaring at them.

“I can find something else,” he offered, but Scrooge waved him off.

“Nonsense, the Buzzards can wait another minute to quibble about the cost of pens,” he dismissed, so Donald leaned back on his heels and tried to ignore the eyes burning a hole in the side of his head.

“Ah, here it is!” Scrooge cheered, yanking the scroll from below a stack of folders, causing the whole pile to wobble dangerously.

“Just put it back when you’re done, eh Donald? Would hate to lose the thing,” Scrooge said, tossing the scroll to him. Donald rolled his eyes.

“You’re the one who said it was useless,” he pointed out, glancing down to confirm it was the right one.

“Aye, but then someone tried to steal it right from under us! Makes it more valuable!” Scrooge told him, before Bradford coughed pointedly. Donald gave them a cheery wave as Scrooge pouted and dragged his feet back to the meeting.

“I’ll give you a ride home if I’m still here when you’re done,” Donald offered before he realized his beak had opened. He blinked, surprised at himself. So did Scrooge.

“Eh, I’ll…” Scrooge started, and Donald prepared himself to be rejected, shoulders tensing without his say-so.

“I’ll let you know, but don’t you wait for me, lad. I think the Buzzards intend to keep me all night!” Scrooge finished, grinning at him, like they were in on the same joke. Donald smiled back, tentative.

“We will have to if you don’t hurry, Mr. McDuck!” Bradford all but growled, and Scrooge disappeared behind the conference room doors

with the posture of a man condemned.

Still reeling a bit, Donald took himself back to the Archives, where Fenton met him with a triumphant grin.

“Might as well test it here, in case there’s an issue with it,” he offered, holding up the scroll. Fenton eyed it with mild interest.

“What does it do?”

“Tells you the truthful answer to anything you ask,” Donald replied as he led the way to a study room. “Don’t get too excited though, it can only answer questions about itself or about the asker.” Fenton stared at him.

“That’s still impressive! Can we test it first? Just, ah- just to make sure it’s working!” Donald chuckled.

“Yeah, you can. Last I saw it only replied in latin though, fair warning.” Fenton looked put out by that, as Donald laid the scroll out.

“It’ll be hard to know if it’s accurate that way,” Fenton pointed out, setting his device on the table. Donald shook his head.

“I can translate. So only ask something you’re okay with me knowing.”

“You speak latin?”

“No, but I can translate it. Latin isn’t really a spoken language anymore.”

On the last row of the scroll was a new line, saying ‘ *I tell the truth about the one who asks and the one who answers.’* Donald passed that along.

“Oh, it answers any questions asked around it?”

“Yes.” ‘ *Yes.’*

“Well then! Er, I guess that works for the test,” Fenton said, looking dejected. Donald gestured at the table.

“Might as well ask another, to be completely certain,” he said mildly, watching Fenton’s eyes light back up. “Scrooge will want it back later, get what you can while you can.”

It wasn’t like the scroll had a limit on how many questions it could answer; that was one of the first things *Donald* had asked.

“But if I can offer some advice?” He added, drawing Fenton’s attention again. “Don’t ask about things like if you’ll get married, or when you’ll die. It’s not usually comforting information.” Fenton nodded, unusually solemn for him.

“I… can’t say that information isn’t tempting, but I don’t want it, no,” Fenton said, more to himself than to Donald, and Donald didn’t ask anything further.

They fell to silence. Despite Fenton's excitement, he looked like he didn't know quite what to ask, or maybe he didn't know what to ask that he was fine with Donald seeing.

"Scroll, do I have spinach in my fridge?" Donald asked after a few moments, and watched as a simple 'yes' scrawled itself across the page. "Ah, good, I don't have to go grocery shopping then." Fenton looked at him incredulously.

"What?" Donald asked, and Fenton stared at him harder, somehow.

"What do you mean, what? We have an incredible thing here, and you're asking about groceries?" His eyes were alight with confusion and shock and the excitement of a scientist faced with the unknown.

Donald wasn't a scientist, nor was he looking at anything new, so he shrugged.

"It's a thing that answers questions accurately; it's only as incredible as the question you ask." He said calmly. Many mages he knew were a bit like that, convinced that magic could only be used for large, dramatic things, would never dare to use the scroll for such mundane questions.

Donald had never had the same view; magic was something he had, something he was, and he saw no reason not to use it when he needed to. Sure, he rarely used his own magic for normal things, but that was more because using a spell for lighting a campfire or watering a plant was usually more work than doing it the normal way.

Plus, artifacts that were made for a use liked to *be* used. They rotted

and broke down if left alone for too long. There were only so many ‘big’ questions he was willing to ask the scroll.

Fenton considered him, dubious, before he turned back to the scroll.

“Scroll, why were you created?” He asked, and Donald found himself impressed as he watched the answer write itself over the parchment.

‘My creator wished to know the important events of his life, and for his loved ones to benefit from my knowledge.’

“Do you- do you like answering questions?”

‘I am not able to answer that question.’

“Are you capable of thought, or opinions?”

‘No.’

Fenton leaned back, looking intrigued.

“I wish I could keep this, it’s a fascinating item,” Fenton said, fingering the edges of the parchment. Donald tapped his fingers on the table.

“I can ask Scrooge, if you want. He wasn’t using it,” Donald offered, surprising himself again. He normally didn’t consider intentionally approaching Scrooge for anything he didn’t have to.

Della had said Scrooge didn't want him to leave. The thought had wormed its way into his thoughts, made him wonder if he had missed something from his uncle. Gave him an urge to test things, to push and prod and see if there was something else under Scrooge's bluster and grumbling.

Made him wonder if it was worth knowing what might be underneath, because he'd learned to never accept bad treatment just because the person meant something else. If Scrooge meant one thing and insulted him instead, Donald wasn't willing to accept that, but it made him wonder *if* there was something under the insults, regardless.

"Oh, no need to bother him, it's not that important, and we have larger things to worry about…" Fenton fussed, reaching out to roll the parchment back up as though to hide it. Donald shrugged, not pushing it for the moment, and gestured towards the sensor.

"So, we doing this here?"

"Oh! Yes, let's. Er, do you think the scroll needs to be writing while we try?" Donald shrugged. The scroll gave off a minor amount of magic at all times, as did most artifacts, but it might need to be active for this.

"Let's try without first," he finally answered, so Fenton turned it on.

The screen was incomprehensible to Donald, but Fenton seemed to know what he was looking at on the screen, a rippling line graph that shot up as he turned it towards the scroll.

"Ah, looks like it was able to pick it up! This is really fascinating data,

do you think Mr. McDuck would let me look at anything else in the Bin?"

"I can take you to the vault if you want, but the board is up there, so we might want to wait," Donald answered absently, peering at the screen to see if he could understand it. It looked like the tablet was picking up several different things at once, based on the different inputs on the screen, but nothing was labeled in a way that he could understand.

"Still? They arrived this morning," Fenton asked, still peering at the tablet.

"Budget meeting, guess there was a lot to discuss," Donald replied; Fenton winced.

"Well, I would like to test it on a few other sources before we call it a success, but I suppose it can wait. Dr. Gearloose will insist on seeing this test himself anyway," Fenton sighed. "He's at a Junior Woodchuck conference for Boyd or he would be here tonight." Donald grinned to himself; Gyro had taken to parenthood awkwardly and with extreme discomfort, but determined regardless. Donald had to say he was proud of him, though he would never say it to Gyro unless he wanted a fight.

"Oh, that's odd; it's detecting something from you," Fenton said, and Donald tuned back in, looking down at the sensor in surprise.

His shields kept him from being detected by most magic users, it was *not good* if that failed.

"Do you have anything else on you? Magical, I mean," Fenton asked.

On him? Wait…

“I have an amulet,” Donald said, tugging at the thin cord around his neck. It was invisible underneath his feathers, and he’d gotten so used to it that he’d forgotten it was on him.

He pulled the blue Caballero gemstone free. They had re-made them after the fight with Felldrake, though they hadn’t been able to replace all the magic they had once carried after the battle rage faded. The new gems only held a shadow of it, tied together as an alert system but with little other power. Donald had advocated for them *not* reforging them with all the magic, concerned about how easy the gems had been to steal. José and Panchito had been game for it, Xandra had had to be convinced.

Donald hadn’t realized until later how much she likely missed the original Caballeros, how much it had to *hurt* to have those gems shattered and broken. For them it had been generations of time, but for her?

“It doesn’t do anything fancy,” he added, when Fenton eyed it with interest; the screen was displaying very different results than the first time, which made Donald nervous. What was it picking up?

“What does it do?” Fenton looked about ready to start taking notes; Donald was violently reminded of Huey.

“It’s connected to two others, like an emergency beacon. Doesn’t do much beyond that,” he explained, though it was a bit more powerful than he was implying. “Old family heirloom, but I’d appreciate you not mentioning it.”

Fenton, thankfully, seemed more interested in the results of the sensor than in why Donald had it.

“It’s giving me very different results, how fascinating,” he murmured, still looking at the screen. Donald tucked the amulet back under his shirt.

“It’s probably made with a different source of magic,” he suggested, as he fixed his shirt collar. He was still in his work suit, which he slightly regretted, as it was getting wrinkled.

“Source?” Fenton was looking straight at him again, eyes bright with interest.

Aw phooey.

Everyone's Emergency Contact

“The gist is that magic can feasibly come from anything. Some sources are easier to use, or more plentiful,” Donald began to explain, wondering why he had let himself get into this. Why he couldn't just stop talking before he let things slip.

(was it because it was so rare that anyone was listening...?)

Fenton had actually pulled out a notepad now, pen scribbling away.

“Can you give me some examples?”

“Magica uses darkness and shadows,” Donald started, because that was easiest. “The amulet was water based, but it’s mixed with the other two amulets that it’s tied to, so your results might be skewed.”

“But- shadows aren’t magical, are they? Are they like that by default?” Donald shook his head.

“No, and yes.” Fenton frowned at him. Donald gave him an awkward gesture and tried to decide how to phrase his answer.

“Magic- things are only considered *magical* because of intent,” he explained slowly, “An object is magical because it was intentionally made, a living being is magic or a magic user because they are a conscious being with the ability to use it. But the things that you use for power don’t have that intention, they just *are.* ”

Fenton wrote a few things down, and looked back up.

“Can anyone learn to access that power?” Donald made an iffy movement with his hand.

“Theoretically, but you need the right mindset,” he answered. Fenton squinted at him.

“What kind of mindset?” Donald pursed his beak.

“Magic doesn’t work if you don’t believe 100% that it’s going to work,” he said slowly. “Doubting for a moment that it’s possible means it won’t be possible. It takes a specific mindset to believe in the impossible.”

“Like Scrooge McDuck?” He asked, and Donald snorted.

“Scrooge believes that *he* can do the impossible, but not by using magic. He believes magic exists, but he doesn’t *believe,* if that makes sense.” Fenton considered that answer for a moment, then nodded.

“Can you use magic?”

It was an obvious question, Donald had to admit. He should have seen it coming. Yet he felt cold and blindsided by the question.

“Do you believe I could?” He asked instead.

Fenton's eyes were sharp when Donald met them.

"If I said no, would that change your answer?" He responded. Donald considered him for a long time, tapping his fingers on the table.

Below them, far below, the ocean flowed and crashed against the rocks. He took a breath.

"No." He didn't elaborate, and Fenton, after looking at him for a long time, didn't ask him to.

"Well, I will probably think of other things to ask you later, but that was very informative!" He said cheerfully, packing away his notepad and scooping up the sensor. Donald chuckled, still feeling a bit off.

"Just text me, I'll answer what I can."

Fenton took the sensor back to the lab, still glowing with excitement. Donald took himself back up to Scrooge's office. The elevator was silent, Scrooge wasn't the kind of person to have elevator music piped in, so Donald was left alone with his thoughts for the ride to the top of the building.

His hand tapped on his amulet, feeling soft pulses of smoke and warmth reach back sleepily. By the end of the week they would be here; it was beyond belief. After so many years apart, now he was looking at four days to wait.

The elevator doors opened, revealing two of the Buzzards; Donald

would admit he didn't know their names. They didn't wait for him to leave the elevator before entering, grumbling to themselves about the late hour, so he was forced to squeeze past them to get out.

Scrooge was sitting down at his desk, roughly sorting piles of folders and reports into some semblance of order. He glanced up when Donald walked up, looking surprised.

"You're still here?"

Donald raised a brow, keeping his face mild.

"No, I already left," he replied, leaning against the desk. Scrooge scowled at him, huffing and adjusting his hat before going back to his paperwork.

"Fenton and I just finished," Donald finally said when Scrooge didn't speak. "If you're almost ready to leave I can drive." So saying, he set the scroll on a clear part of the desk. Scrooge glanced at it briefly, then at Donald, before he tucked it into a drawer and stood.

"Well. I suppose I can sort through this pile of wasted paper later," he declared, and went about getting his coat and cane from the rack next to the door, while Donald shook his head in amusement. From the corner of his eye, he saw Bradford Buzzard exit the conference room, rummaging through his briefcase as he did. He didn't look at either of them as he walked, finally sorting his bag and going towards the bathroom.

A slight surprise, given Donald was fairly certain the Buzzards drove together, but he didn't pay it much attention.

“Fenton asked if he could borrow the scroll, if you don’t need it immediately,” he told Scrooge as they walked to the elevator. Bradford paused briefly, glancing at them both, before he huffed and continued on his way.

Right, he hated adventures for being expensive; Donald doubted he liked Fenton and the R&D department much either.

“Aye? What would he need that thing for?” Scrooge shrugged, trailing after.

“Professional curiosity, probably. I think he wants to solve magic from a scientific standpoint, when he’s got some free time.” Scrooge rolled his eyes at the idea, jamming the button for the parking ramp.

“Bah, magic. Not worth the effort, can’t see why he would want to study that nonsense!”

Donald tuned him out; he’d heard this rant so often he could recite it from memory. Magic was a waste of time, it was lazy, it was wasteful. Better to do things the right way instead of waving a wand to solve all of your problems. Et cetera and so on.

“Lena is magic,” he pointed out mildly when Scrooge paused for a breath, and his uncle choked on his spit in surprise.

“Ach! Well, er- that’s a different matter. She’s made of magic, can’t help that. Different from using it for every little thing instead of working for it, like Magica!” Donald considered him, a stray thought picking at him.

“What about things you can’t do without magic?” He asked, morbidly curious. Scrooge’s face twisted in annoyance, like the possibility of magic being useful annoyed him.

“Sure, it can be useful, but most of the time!”

Donald shrugged, deceptively casual.

“It’s just a tool. We all use tools instead of doing things the hard way,” he replied, and Scrooge shook his head.

“Doing things right is usually the hard way! You won’t catch me taking the easy way out!”

Their elevator opened in the garage. Donald’s car was the only one visible; the Buzzard’s car was either already gone or parked on another level.

“So you’re walking home?” Donald asked innocently. Scrooge blinked at him.

“What?”

“You just said you wouldn’t take the easy way. Does that mean you’re walking home?”

A pause.

“Why in the blazes would I do that?” Scrooge demanded, but in an annoyed tone that said he knew he was caught. Donald graciously didn’t call him out on it, so they left the ramp in silence.

The interior of the car was dark, lit by occasional flashes of streetlights as they went through Duckburg towards Kilmotor Hill. Donald hummed quietly to himself, but left the radio off. Scrooge stared ahead, hands clenched around his cane.

Which was a sight better than grabbing the handles of the car, like he had the first few times Donald had driven, as a teenager. Funny, Donald had forgotten his uncle teaching him to drive, in their adventure Jeep.

“How’s living with Gladstone going?” Scrooge finally asked, tone bitter. Donald didn’t look over at him, keeping his eyes on the road.

“Well, which is a surprise. Kinda expected to get sick of it, but it’s been alright. We’ll see if that lasts when the house is finished.”

“House?” Bitterness was replaced with curiosity. Donald nodded.

“Glad’s building a house on the beach. Guess he decided to put down some roots,” Donald explained, surprised that Scrooge hadn’t heard this from any of the kids.

“Ah. Well, glad to hear he’s trying to settle down some,” Scrooge said absently, sounding thoughtful, but Donald didn’t look over.

“The kids want to put lights up on your part of the trail,” he said quietly, tapping his thumbs on the steering wheel. “I told them to ask

you, since it would have to be wired in." Scrooge made a strange noise, like he had been about to laugh or scoff and choked on it instead.

"I'll consider it," he finally replied, which probably meant no, but Donald wasn't worried. The Manor lights lit a good chunk of the path already, and Gladstone owned half of that part of the hill anyway.

They reached the Manor, which was dark; only the porch lights were still on. Donald followed his uncle up the stairs, receiving an odd look in return. He ignored it, going straight to the boy's room to say goodnight. They were already in bed, it had gotten very late, but they were awake enough to reply with sleepy smiles. Donald let out a content sigh, and went to Webby's room. She was more awake, curled in bed with a book in her lap, and accepted a goodnight kiss to the forehead with a delighted giggle.

He didn't see anyone else on his way out, and the boat was silent when he got to bed.

As he had suspected, 330 was still trying to sort through the Blot file, so there was no reason to go back to SHUSH yet. Donald went to Ducklair Tower instead; he found it easier to work there than in headquarters, where he had to put on a front and be someone else.

There was nobody else on the 151st floor, after all.

Donald's eyes darted towards the globe by the computer, and looked away again.

One day, he reminded himself, one day Uno would be active again, in

a ridiculously tall body and calling himself Odin. One day.

But that didn't mean Donald didn't ache to see him now, to talk to him, to time travel back to the future and demand answers for when and how and what could Donald do, Uno, please-

It was a moot point. Lyla had gone back to her own time when Donald had retired, and while she had given him a way of contacting her, he doubted begging for information would be something she would honor. He knew not to meddle with the future, she knew he knew that. All he could hope was that if he was supposed to do something, if there was a single step he was meant to take, that they would make sure he did it, that the future remained as it was supposed to be. Any time he didn't get a visit surely meant the future was safe, right?

He had to believe that, or he would work himself into a state again, and that benefited no-one.

Donald checked the Blot file first, but there was nothing new. Faces and names were still being identified, investigated and dismissed in record time, but not a single lead had panned out, and the few they still had (the coded auction list, the identities of the guards, the red haired woman and the beagle from the party, and Dr. Ghast) were proving difficult to follow.

Donald's own mission had even less to work with, since it was just a hunch based on potential shared motives and available resources. The Blot had no prior connections to FOWL, so there were no useful connections to explore. He instead gathered up information they had on FOWL, which was mostly out of date. Bases, names of ex-agents (dead, missing or in prison), plots and plans that had never come to fruition.

SHUSH had reams and reams of information on FOWL, but they'd

been all but certain that the organization had been dead. Just like Donald had stopped thinking about the Blot, if he was being honest, but that was more of a coincidence than a useful comparison. The Blot had only been broken out of prison for a year anyway.

330 had been correct that FOWL's goals had never been completely clear; who ran the organization was unknown, and it often seemed that their different main operatives (Black Heron and Steelbeak in particular) had different goals altogether. Heron was all about showy, traditional villainous acts; she monologued, she had petty rivalries and a nemesis-esque relationship with Agent 22, every action she had was branded and dramatic.

Steelbeak was more of a bruiser; he was petty, arrogant, ready to fight anyone at the drop of a hat. He never seemed to have a plan of his own, just orders. Clearly he was trusted with leading a team, but either he wasn't trusted with planning a target or he had no interest in doing so.

Then there were the Eggheads, foot soldiers that were never far from their boss, never seen on their own. They were often left behind as cannon fodder if FOWL abandoned a base or plot, and there were always more to fill their rosters at the next base.

Or there had been; Agent 22 had led a vicious purge of every known FOWL base and operation shortly before the boys had been born. The boys, and Webby. FOWL had never recovered, so they had thought.

Donald knew some agents were trying to answer how they had come back, whether they had truly been gone or just working on less noticeable plans. Donald was more interested in the burned out labs. Data had been gathered from the remains and certainly they had been monitored, but FOWL had had a lot of locations attached by 22, and they may have been desperate enough to risk re-using them.

So he gathered every known base and started going through each one for potential leads. It felt like busy work, but he needed to start somewhere, and this was as good a place as any.

There was a car parked by the houseboat Donald didn't recognize when he pulled in. On the pier stood a figure in a pink shirt, arms wrapped around himself as he stared out at the water.

"Drake?" Donald called out, and Drake jumped, flailing into a complete spin and catching himself on a post.

"Ah! Donald! I wasn't expecting you… yet! Wasn't expecting you yet, obviously I expected you, here, at your boat. Heh," Drake trailed off, rubbing the back of his neck. Donald grinned at him, gestured towards the boat.

"Come in?"

Donald eyed his friend and went about making some hot cocoa. He'd yet to find a situation that hot cocoa couldn't improve, at least a bit. Drake took a seat, looking around the boat with interest.

"Didn't know what to expect from a houseboat, to be honest. It's nice," Drake offered, taking the mug carefully, like he expected it to spill over his hands. Donald recognized the gesture, but it was strange to see it on someone else.

"Thanks. It took a while to get it this nice, you should have seen it when I bought it," Donald told him cheerfully, sitting down at the table.

“You rebuilt it?” Drake asked, and he looked genuinely curious. Donald nodded, happy to talk about the process for a while. He had rebuilt this boat from the ground up three times at least, by now.

They went back and forth for a while, which was new; normally they had the kids or at least Launchpad with them. Donald liked Drake, he was a passionate guy, confident and personable, if a bit intense about some things. He talked about the set work he’d done in a theater club, Donald laughed and said they could have met if they’d gone to the same school. It was nice.

They fell into silence for a few moments.

“Somehow, I don’t think this is why you came by, though,” he offered, and Drake just slumped, like the tension had been holding him up. He was a talented actor, Donald had to admit, because when Drake glanced up this time, he looked exhausted, feathers drooping and eyes heavy. The tender way he held himself, it was obvious he was sore, maybe injured.

“I- I’ll admit, there is something serious I wanted to talk to you about. Should probably have texted you first or something,” Drake admitted. Donald shrugged.

“I don’t mind. Maybe let me know in advance if you want to talk or be distracted, and that you’re coming by?” Donald joked, and got a weak chuckle.

“Yeah, sorry about that. Was kinda an impulsive decision, but I do have your number and all. Launchpad just mentioned you’d moved, and I just found myself driving here,” he admitted.

Donald paused, waiting him out.

“You- I mean… Gos and your kids are friends, right?”

Donald nodded. Drake’s head bobbed, staring down at the table.

“If- if she was ever in danger, and I couldn’t protect her…”

Donald felt his eyes widen a bit, even as he gestured for Drake to continue. What about him made people want to ask him this?

“Would she be safe here?”

“Of course she would be,” Donald replied, “for as long as she needed to be.” Drake nodded, expression grim.

“Launchpad would be her guardian, if anything happened to me. But if he wasn’t around, for an emergency… I just want to know that there’s somewhere she could go, if LP and I weren’t… there.”

That wasn’t quite what Donald had expected, but with Launchpad’s extracurriculars and Drake being in a dangerous occupation himself, Donald could understand wanting to have a safety net, especially with Gosalyn’s own history with Taurus Bulba. Launchpad had mentioned in passing that Drake didn’t have much of a family, and Launchpad’s didn’t live very close either.

“She’s welcome whenever you need. Doesn’t need to be for the world ending,” Donald added with a grin. Drake gave him a relieved smile, and buried his face in his long-empty mug.

When he spoke next, he asked about what plays Donald had been in, and they didn't revisit the prior conversation for the rest of the night. Drake eventually left to head home, Donald assumed, and he went about getting something to eat. It was late, the family had flown out to Monaco while he'd been at lunch, and he was highly tempted to just order pizza.

Would they deliver to the beach?

They probably would for Gladstone. Pity he had already gone to his hotel for the night. His ongoing house was lit by the setting sun, some of the exterior walls already up. Soon he'd have a permanent neighbor.

In the meantime, he made a sandwich, tidied up the boat and tried to go to sleep. It wasn't an easy process, with the stresses of SHUSH and the Blot and on and on and on. Good thing he was used to running on little sleep.

He settled into his hammock, staring at the ceiling and willing his eyes to close.

From his bedside table, his shield/watch chimed with a new message.

Darkwing: if anyone's near the harbor, could use an assist

Darkwing: only it turns out there are in fact many more gunman than expected

Paperinik: omw. what did you even DO?

Donald didn't wait for an answer. He didn't stop to think that his uniform was at Ducklair Tower, that the harbor was nowhere near the tower. He just grabbed his shield and dove for the car.

His shield didn't go off again.

Revelations

Donald got to the harbor and followed the sounds of gunfire, abandoning his car in the marina parking lot. The shield was still silent, strapped to his arm, as he leapt from building to building. Below him, a number of people milled, occasionally shooting into shadows. He couldn't tell if they were speaking, or where they were coming from.

He also had no idea where Darkwing was, and no way to find him with all these people. These heavily armed, jumpy people, who would probably shoot him without a thought.

He could feel the ocean flowing just a few blocks away, and without thought he reached out and brought it to him, draping himself in Paperinik's cape and mask.

It wouldn't account for his voice, and anyone who got close might see how it didn't look identical to his actual uniform, but it would work for the moment. He didn't want them to see anything but the cape anyway.

Another gunshot, much closer, and what he thought was Darkwing speaking, but it was hard to hear. He ran to the noise, took just long enough to identify the shooter, and took them out at the knees.

Everything was a blur after that; dodge, punch, disarm (broken wrists couldn't carry guns, and it tended to drop people fast), look for Darkwing, repeat. He took a blow to the side of his head and stumbled into a wall, ears ringing.

"PK?" Donald thought he heard, but someone was coming at him with a crowbar, so he had to dodge instead of looking. Using the wall, he

launched himself at the newest attacker and dragged them both to the ground with a nasty thud.

Nobody else had responded to Darkwing's earlier messages, and it was beginning to make him nervous. Gizmoduck was more of a daytime hero, and Darkwing was based in St. Canard, not Duckburg; what was he even doing here, and why hadn't he gotten back-up first?

New rule, Donald decided grimly, dodging another bullet and punching the shooter in the face; if they were going to be allies, they had to warn each other of when they had cases like this. Or this newest crop of heroes were going to get themselves killed.

He tossed the shooter into his fellows, knocking a pile of them over. His arm was throbbing and his head ached. At the other end of the alley he saw Darkwing's cape as its' owner roundhouse kicked a man in the head.

Donald only caught a brief glimpse in the shadows of the alley before he was surrounded again, forced further into the alley, which ended in an extremely narrow gap and was filled with garbage. They were trying to corner him, and it was working.

One thing he noticed, as a fist just missed his head and slammed into the wall behind him, was none of the guards (if thats what they were) were wearing a uniform, but they were all dressed for combat; heavy boots, dark simple clothing. And the number of guns was also odd, even for this area of Duckburg. What had Darkwing been looking for here?

A bullet hit the wall close enough to spray his face with brick, and that was enough of that. He hit the closest person, ignoring that there was a gun right by his face (weren't they worried that they would hit their own people?), and using his momentum to swing around

towards the exit, kicking out the legs of the people that had been cornering him a moment ago.

Someone backed into him; only a flicker of purple in the corner of his eye stopped him from throwing the man over his shoulder. Still, he spared a full glance to confirm it was Darkwing, who was looking worse for wear, blood smeared in the feathers of his face and cape half ripped off.

He expected Darkwing to make some quip, but the man was focused and grim. He looked, well, *dangerous.*

He turned back to the remaining attackers, who were hesitating now. Cornered into the alley. They still had a clear numbers advantage, there were five of them on Donald's side alone, but there had been more before, and it was Donald and Darkwing that were still standing.

He waited for someone to speak, to threaten or offer a deal or something, but everyone remained silent.

The one good thing about having so many of them in the alley, Donald thought, as he waited for movement, was that their opponents had stopped shooting. Either that or they had run out of ammunition, who knew? Darkwing panted behind him, backs touching.

Donald reached back, his hands hidden in the folds of their capes, and stole a smoke bomb from Darkwing's belt. He felt a twitch, that might have been a laugh, and tossed the bomb at their feet.

Gizmoduck: whats going on??? I'm in New Quackmore, I can be there in maybe thirty minutes?

Darkwing was all for staying and trying to break back into the building, but Donald gestured to their collective bloody bodies and shook his head. Their collective injuries were enough to trigger a lot of questions, and McDuck Industries wasn't close enough for Donald to want to try to limp there, especially with what was possibly a concussion. Instead, Donald led the way across the rooftops to the 151st and forced himself not to think about anything except Darkwing's obviously bleeding torso and his own ringing ears.

They were collectively leaning on each other as Donald passed his hand over the sensor. He was exhausted, and he had work in the morning, and he missed Uno being there to greet him so much-

He sighed and tugged Darkwing towards the med bay, where the lights came up automatically. Uno would have been asking questions, pulling out supplies, but he wasn't here, so Donald started in himself, leaving Darkwing to sit on a gurney.

"Thanks for the assist," Darkwing said, peeling his cape away from his body with a grimace. Donald nodded in acknowledgement but didn't speak. Darkwing gave him an odd look, but decided to respect Donald's silence. Or was too tired to question it. Either way, they helped each other patch up in silence.

It was odd, trusting someone to be that close to him, but Donald wasn't nervous about it. Which was a nice feeling, trusting someone to have his back. So much so that Donald let his eyes fall closed, briefly, while Darkwing bandaged a gouge on his back.

Gizmoduck: do either of you need help? I found the police dealing with your aftermath, but nobody knew where you went

Darkwing sighed at the buzzing noise, while Donald stifled a chuckle. He dragged his sore arm up high enough to reply.

Paperinik: we're fine, thx

Paperinik: DW says you should investigate the building they were coming from

"I do not! Don't tell him those lies!" Darkwing shouted; Donald flinched away with a choked squawk, bringing his hands up to his ears at the noise. Then he winced again, the movement yanking at the bandages on his back, and tried to stop moving, gritting his teeth.

Darkwing stood just in front of him, hands extended like he'd tried to help (or was he just reaching for the shield?). Donald rubbed his face, levity gone.

Paperinik: well ok HE doesnt say that, but I do

Gizmoduck: where are you?

Gizmoduck: I was already doing that before you said anything anyway, I can share what I could find?

"Are you alright?" Darkwing asked, still staring at him. Donald shrugged, and gestured to his back with an inquisitive look.

"What? Er, yeah, it's bandaged, if that's your question," Darkwing replied, looking lost, but Donald wasn't looking. Now that they both

had dealt with their injuries, all he wanted to do was leave, not invite Gizmoduck inside.

But he knew, on some level, that he was being ridiculous, and he didn't think that Uno would want him trying to rappel across town.

He should change into his actual uniform though; the spell would hold just fine, even Darkwing tugging at his shirt hadn't disrupted it, but that didn't mean he should keep it on if they were going to be meeting. Magically created clothing tended to look different, like the magic itself was slightly visible in the strands. Besides, that would give him a chance to put on his voice changer.

He shook his head to clear it, uncertain how long he'd been standing there, and turned towards where his uniform sat. Found Darkwing looking at him with suspicion, standing near the uniform stand. His arms were crossed, his expression was dark. Donald sighed, slow and loud, and let his arms drop to his sides.

Darkwing gestured towards the uniform, then at Donald.

"You know, I did notice your uniform doesn't quite match up. Get a new one recently?" He asked, managing something near neutrally curious instead of accusatory.

Donald had an easy excuse of just saying yes, it was a spare, he hadn't been near his base when Darkwing had sent a message. But that would require his voice changer. Which was behind Darkwing. It was something he couldn't fake with magic. He could also pretend he had lost his voice to cover for that.

Gizmoduck: hello?

Gizmoduck: you could meet me at McDuck Industries if that would be easier, but I'll have to let you in

Donald glanced at the messages, then back at Darkwing, who hadn't moved, and was looking more and more suspicious as he waited for a response.

"Paperinik?"

Donald scowled, and snapped his fingers, dissolving the spell in a mild flash of light.

"It was the best I could do," he explained easily, watching Darkwing's eyes go wide, "since I was at home when you called."

"Donald?!"

Donald felt his eyebrow rise, even as a grin tugged at his mouth. Funny, he felt completely calm about this now that he had done it; he'd expected immediate regret. Or fear. He waggled his fingers.

"But- you! You're PK's best friend! He-" Darkwing sputtered, gesturing wildly. Donald grinned wider.

"We've- you told me PK was dead!"

“He was retired, same thing really.” And technically Donald had only almost said it.

“How do you- didn’t Paperinik start by doing *pranks?”*

Donald nodded cheerfully; he was a bit embarrassed by his origins, as an adult, but it was still funny. And Darkwing had no room to judge anyway, given his own start.

Darkwing continued to garble words out, looking like he’d simultaneously discovered nirvana and also found that he hated the music there. Then he stopped entirely, staring, and Donald felt a chill roll down his spine.

“You were just a kid when you started,” Darkwing said, dawning horror appearing in his expression, the eye whites of his mask going wide.

“I was fifteen,” Donald nodded.

“You were a *baby.* How? And you built *this place?”* And abruptly, this was no longer funny, and Donald felt his expression drop. He stepped forward to grab the uniform; Darkwing backed away.

“No, this… belongs to an old friend of mine. He isn’t here anymore,” Donald said quietly, changing into his costume briskly. Darkwing frowned, nodded.

Paperinik: we’re at Ducklair Tower. Land on the roof

He settled at the computer, running his fingers idly against the keyboard.

"Your friend made this place?" Darkwing asked, leaning nearby, looking incredibly gentle. Donald didn't look at him directly.

"Yes and no. It was initially built by his… father, I suppose. But he lived here, and the upgrades were his."

"Can I ask what happened?"

"His father decided he didn't need him anymore, and just… deactivated his entire system," Donald said quietly, and then chuckled humourlessly at Darkwing's face.

"Uno was an AI," he explained, and Darkwing's eyes went wide, then angry.

"And the guy that created him just *killed* him?" Somewhere deep down, Donald felt… vindicated, that Darkwing immediately leapt to Uno's defense. Everett had been so *baffled,* that Donald thought of Uno as a person.

"Everett never thought of Uno as alive, not really. Just a very intelligent tool. So when he no longer needed him for anything, he just- turned him off."

"And there was no way to, well, turn him back on?" Darkwing asked, staring at the dark computer screen, disturbed.

“Not that I found. And I tried, when it first happened. Poured over the system, called everyone I knew that was even remotely computer literate, but…” Donald sighed, and didn’t continue. Darkwing nodded, looking grim, and then glanced at Donald’s eyes (well, mask) again.

“So, this is why you said you didn’t have a phone,” he quipped, clearly trying to lighten the mood, and Donald snorted out a surprised laugh.

“Yeah, that’s why,” he managed, when he could breathe again. “Figured you would notice if the two numbers matched.”

The system pinged, and the screen lit up.

There were two computer systems; Uno’s, which were the taller monitors and the orb, and the lower set, which was just a standard computer system, though a fairly advanced one, even after all these years. Uno was able to control all of them at once, but he’d preferred the ones that a user couldn’t touch.

“Unknown individual near rooftop access,” the computer told him; it wasn’t Uno’s voice, and Donald could never decide if that was better or worse. He almost spoke, before tapping a confirmation instead, opening the elevator door for Gizmoduck.

“So, the identity thing…” Darkwing started, tugging at the edge of his hat. Donald glanced at him, then shook his head.

“Tell me when you trust me, not because you think you owe me or something,” Donald told him, and Gizmoduck came inside before he was able to argue.

“Hey! Um, so, this is new, and I have a lot of questions, but first! The place you guys were raiding!” Gizmo called out cheerfully, skidding to a stop in front of them.

“Technically that was just Darkwing, I just came in to beat people up,” Donald pointed out, leaning backwards in his seat.

“There weren’t supposed to be people around,” Darkwing grumbled.

“Yes, well, I can see why, since the building is listed as abandoned. Thankfully they were too busy chasing you down to clean up after themselves, so I was able to find what they were hiding!”

“It was smuggled goods,” Darkwing snapped immediately, and Gizmoduck nodded.

“Yes! Antiquities and a few magical artifacts; my new magic sensor confirmed they still have some magical energy, so if they were being smuggled by the Blot he hadn’t had a chance to drain them,” Gizmo explained cheerfully, while Darkwing looked up with interest.

“You have a magic detector?” He asked, curious, and glanced at Donald briefly; Donald wondered if he’d been too distracted by the rest to think about the clear use of magic earlier.

“Yes; we used some artifacts that Mr. McDuck had at the Money Bin. Which was also interesting to experiment with, but that’s another story… regardless, we have one working. It’s too bulky to carry for the most part, but we were able to integrate it into my armor.”

Darkwing looked jealous.

“So, you’re thinking that you found someone smuggling for the Blot?” Donald asked, hoping to get things back on track. Darkwing glanced at him and nodded.

“My sources helped me find someone who was showing a heavy interest in any old religious idols. Figured it was worth checking out. I didn’t expect that kind of reaction though, even for the Blot. Who knew he had that kind of firepower available to him?” Darkwing asked, scowling and rubbing at his injured chest. Donald swatted his hand away from the bandages.

“Well, it was more than just the antiques inside,” Gizmo added, “There were also more weapons that look like they would need a similar power cell to Dr. Ghast’s, though a smaller version. I salvaged a few to look at further, but I left them at the lab.”

Darkwing nodded, tapping his fingers on the desk.

“I saw part of that before they caught me, didn’t get a good look. No power, though, right?”

Gizmo shook his head.

“Nothing that I could find. Based on what I saw, all they needed were power cells, and the method of charging them. The police came in to process the scene at that point, so I had to leave. I’m hoping to take a look at the report later,” he replied. Donald made a note to have SHUSH go in and review if they hadn’t caught wind of this by the morning.

Gizmo was looking around with intense interest, and Darkwing kept

giving him significant glances, as if to warn him he still had questions to answer. Donald felt his headache throbbing and just wanted to sleep.

“I have some of the Blot’s old tech here, if you want to compare that to the weapons you found,” Donald said, before either of them could ask him anything, and that successfully distracted the pair of them.

“Really? Yes, that would be great! Seeing what’s changed in the designs could tell us who he’s being supplied by!” Gizmoduck enthused, hands waving wildly to match him.

Donald nodded, and vanished into the storage areas, passing through a locked door with a wave. His old car was here, as well as old and damaged equipment they’d been repairing, spares, and remnants of other battles. A damaged time machine they’d cobbled together to chase the Time Pirates, the remains of an Evronian ship, a few of the Beagle Boys weapons, even one of Uno’s orbs.

He ignored most of it, though he glanced at a pile of newspaper clippings for a moment with a sad smile. Uno had wanted to commemorate their activities in something other than weaponry taken after the fact, and had been making a scrapbook of headlines, good and bad.

It sat incomplete on the table. Donald had asked, once, why Uno was working with the physical pages instead of digital versions. Uno had said he wanted something that couldn’t be deleted.

The boxes he wanted were easy enough to load onto a dolly and haul back out, where both heroes were waiting with interest. Gizmoduck looked especially eager, hands twitching by his sides.

“Fair warning, this is *only* the weapons,” Donald called out as he started to pull things out of their storage crates. “I didn’t keep any of the magic absorbing tech.”

“No? Was it too damaged or something?” GIzmo asked with interest, as he and Darkwing circled closer.

“It was after I destroyed it,” Donald replied grimly, glaring down at the slightly scorched blaster that had nearly killed him, once upon a time.

“Destroyed?” Gizmo asked blankly, looking back up at him with clear confusion. Donald shrugged.

“Blew everything to pieces, incinerated the scraps, threw the dust into the dump. Trashed the computers that had the plans too. I wasn’t kidding when I said anyone working with him would be starting from scratch.”

“But- why?” Gizmo asked, lost. Donald looked back at him mildly.

“Because I didn’t want there to be any chance someone could use it again,” he said shortly, tapping his fingers on the storage crate edge.

Gizmo opened his mouth again, then blinked, like he had come to some conclusion, and closed it again. He seemed conflicted, but he didn’t argue, and packed the weapons (mostly blasters, one bomb) carefully back into their crate.

“I’m going to drop these off with Dr. Gearloose. I can come back in a bit?” He asked, but didn’t wait for an answer before carrying the crate

out. Donald watched after him, confused by the abrupt departure, and glanced at Darkwing, who looked less confused.

"What was that-" he started to ask, but Darkwing held up a hand, and tugged his mask off before Donald could do more than choke in surprise.

Drake Mallard blinked back at him, face pale under the mask, eyes dark. He looked nervous, and somewhat excited. Donald blinked at him.

He'd suspected, sure, there were odd similarities and Drake didn't use a voice changer while in the cape, but confirming was a whole other thing.

"You- you played Darkwing in a *movie!"* He yelled, because that was truly the most important point. "You're dating *Launchpad,* who *met you at that movie!"* How had nobody figured this out?

Drake chuckled sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. Out of the mask, he seemed less confident.

" *You* told people you're your own best friend," he returned, and Donald shrugged.

"It explained why I knew things I shouldn't, and my family is so weird nobody questioned it," he explained, and got a playfully irritated look in return.

"Can't believe it was so *easy*. I tried to find you, you know? When I was younger. And for some reason I never thought that you were your

own best friend."

"People don't expect much from me," Donald replied in a light voice. Drake frowned.

"What does that mean?" He asked. Donald shrugged.

"I'm clumsy, and unlucky, and then there's the voice... People tend to make assumptions about my competence based on that," he explained casually. It was something he was used to, something he in fact banked on in many ways. But Drake still looked baffled, staring at him like he was expecting a joke.

"You're a Navy veteran who raised *triplets,"* he stressed, like it was Donald who didn't know that. "I don't even understand how you have *time* to do this, let alone be this good at both!"

"You know I was in the Navy?" He replied, ignoring the rest, because he had no idea how to process the rest of it. Sure, he had accomplished plenty in his life, but from the outside he was a loser that had been living in his rich uncle's pool and couldn't go a day without lighting himself on fire.

"Yeah, Gos mentioned it. And Launchpad sings your praises all the time. I was honestly really nervous to meet you, and that was before this whole," and here he gestured vaguely around them to the room at large, "superhero reveal. Eager and nervous."

"Me?" Donald could understand Launchpad wanting Drake to meet the kids, and Scrooge, and even Della, but him? And yes, he did remember Launchpad being excited about it, but Launchpad was always excited about things; Donald hadn't realized the interest in their meeting went both ways.

“Yes! LP really looks up to you, you know; likes your music, thinks you’re a great parent and a great guy, he even told me all about your cooking!” Drake insisted, properly distressed that Donald didn’t *get it.*

Except, well, Donald did get that Launchpad liked him, thought of him as family, could even see how he might think Donald was a good parent. He just didn’t understand him ‘singing his praises.’

“I’m just… not used to most people noticing things like that. The voice tends to be the first thing anyone notices. Or I trip over my feet and *that’s* what they see first,” he said helplessly.

He’d never actually revealed his hero persona to people that had met him as Donald first; he’d revealed his normal identity to people that knew PK, not the other way around. He’s always assumed, on some level, that people’s opinion of PK would go down if they knew it was just Donald under the mask. But the way Drake was talking, it was like it was the exact opposite situation, like PK had gotten better just because Donald was the one doing the job.

“Well, LP did. He’s good like that. And I have to say,” here he paused, significant, “I think you lived up to the hype. Mostly.” Donald snorted, glad for the levity; he had no idea how to handle that much praise at once, it was strange. Moreso coming from Darkwing, who was such a confident man most of the time that this side of him was disconcerting. For PK, he could kinda see it, he was a hero and Darkwing was based on a superhero TV show, clearly he had a thing for them, but for Donald? That was new, and strange.

“You’re more than living up to your hype, for what it’s worth,” Donald said finally, and Drake grinned at him like he’d just won a prize.

“I want tricks for handling the kids and the hero thing,” he said a few minutes later, pulling his mask back on. Donald peered at him curiously.

“What makes you think I have a solution for that? My kids don’t know about this,” he replied, and Darkwing blinked in surprise.

“Wait, really? Your family is all about adventures, isn’t this just another part of it?”

Donald shook his head.

“Nobody in my family knew. They still don’t; it wasn’t something I wanted Scrooge and Della knowing, they wouldn’t have taken it well at all. And the kids… They don’t know a lot about what I did before they hatched. Adventures, people I knew, none of it. Kinda let it all go when… I was retired before they were born anyway.”

“That has to be tricky,” Darkwing said after a moment, “keeping it from them now. Being active, I mean.” Donald shrugged.

“They’re off on adventures a lot, and I don’t live in the Manor, so it’s easy for nobody to notice when I’m out. Got lucky with the death portal thing with Gizmoduck, not sure how I would have sold that if anyone had been around to ask.” He said simply, and Gizmoduck arrived before they could continue the conversation.

Magical Testing and other Investigations

Donald had expected to just discuss the potential next steps for the investigation into the Blot, but apparently Gizmo had brought some prototype shields for Darkwing to try out, which was all well and good. Except…

“We don’t have a working weapon to test the shields on,” Donald pointed out with a frown. Darkwing eyed him; he still hadn’t addressed the obvious question of Donald’s little disguise earlier, and Donald was starting to wonder why. They’d had time alone to do so, if he was avoiding outing him to Gizmo.

“We could try to power on one of the blasters?” Darkwing offered instead of calling Donald out.

“It’s not the blaster itself, it’s the power source. We need a mage or one of the cells themselves, and I’m not too keen on the idea of powering one of them up,” Donald replied.

He should offer, there were no better options if he wanted these two to have the right kind of protection. But he already felt raw and unmasked from earlier, even if he’d had some choice in the situation. This felt like he was being dragged into doing spells, like it was a cheap party trick.

“Ah, I suppose I can ask Mr. McDuck if he has anything we can use?” Gizmo offered, frowning down at his prototype; he looked tired. Donald would bet he’d been burning the candle at both ends to develop that thing, in such a short turnaround time to even being able to detect the right energy for it. Maybe he’d hoped that PK had something lying around that would let them test it.

Or maybe he was exhausted and had forgotten the issue; they all were trying to catch up on a year-long head start to stop the Blot before he restarted his work. If he hadn't already; the power cells they had found were charged, after all, and it might be too much to hope that none of them had had a living source.

Gizmoduck could have been killed months ago by one of those very cells; it was blind luck that Donald had decided to join the fight. Just-luck.

He needed to talk to Gladstone. Make sure he was being safe, that he wouldn't be a target.

Donald sighed, low, and raised one hand.

"This does not leave this room. This is never spoken of again, alright?" He said. Darkwing's eyes widened slightly, and Gizmoduck stared at him.

"I- alright?" Gizmo replied, and Donald lit a fireball in his hand.

There was always a moment of confusion, when someone saw magic for the first time. Not an artifact, but just raw magic, something happening that shouldn't be possible. Disbelief, the confusion, before settling on awe or fear as their worldview restructured itself. Some people never left the doubting phase.

Gizmoduck's expression dropped, then lit up like a child in a candy store, all but shrieking as he jolted forward.

"You! Oh, but that means-! I- ah, right. No questions, right?" Gizmo

stuttered out, losing steam and shoulders drooping when Donald shrunk back a bit. Behind him, Darkwing watched the fire like it held some answers he'd been seeking out for a long time, ones he hadn't expected.

"How close were you to doing that every time we argued magic wasn't real?" He asked, one eyebrow tilting upwards. Donald felt a sharp grin cross his face, and the fire burned brighter.

"Oh, I nearly lit your cape on fire," he responded casually, letting the fireball go out, then glanced at Gizmoduck.

"Let's test your shield. Then, you can ask a few questions. But I'm not kidding, I don't want you telling a single other person. Not Launchpad, not Gyro, especially not McDuck." Gizmo nodded vigorously, and snapped back to the shield.

It was more of a gauntlet; Donald thought it might have been styled after his own, but it could be a coincidence. Gizmo fiddled with it for a moment, then held it out to Darkwing.

"Care to test it first?" He asked, and from anyone else Douald would have thought he was being snarky, but he just seemed earnest. Darkwing eyed it dubiously, then slowly reached out to strap it on.

"If this doesn't work, am I gonna be a roasted duck?" He asked sarcastically, and Donald shook his head.

"Might turn you green though," he added, when Darkwing continued to look at him with suspicion. Gizmoduck stifled a laugh, then stepped back.

“Squeeze your fist together three times to activate it,” he instructed, and a hazy blue field surrounded Darkwing when he did so. Donald walked forward, poking the shield with his finger. It felt like the magical equivalent of jelly. He could force his fingers through, if he prodded.

He readied another spell, this one a simple witch light, and lobbed it at Darkwing, who instinctively flinched to the side. The light stuck to the shield instead of going through, and pulsed there like a firefly.

“That’s… unexpected,” Gizmo admitted, with his magic detector out. “PK, can you use something with a bit more power? This one isn’t reading very high in energy to me.” Donald pursed his beak.

“There’s not a lot of powerful options that aren’t potentially dangerous if they don’t get stuck,” he pointed out, earning him two nervous glances.

“I’m a battle mage, I didn’t exactly learn gardening spells!” He defended himself, but the looks didn’t fade. Darkwing mouthed ‘battle mage’ to himself silently, but said nothing.

“That wasn’t… quite my concern,” Gizmo admitted. “A brighter light thing might work?”

No, it wouldn’t. Brighter witch lights tended to become will-o’-the-wisps, unless they just lit on fire. Donald considered the shield and the pulsing light, then held out a hand. Darkwing stood still this time, but he looked nervous.

“Darkwing,” he said, with *intent,* and a green spell left his hands to shoot at Darkwing. Unlike the light, it punched through with little difficulty and broke over Darkwing’s head before he could even react.

Instantly, the bags under his eyes vanished, and he stood straighter in shock.

"What was *that* ?" He demanded, looking down at himself like he did expect to have turned green.

"Healing spell. Don't bank on it, mine don't work very well," Donald warned, but both heroes were staring at him again.

"You can *heal* people?" Darkwing demanded, as he shoved his shirt up to poke at his bandages. He winced and withdrew after prodding once.

"Not *well,* but yes. I'm better at bursts of energy, I'm rubbish at healing physical injuries."

"But you can heal actual injuries?" Gizmoduck asked, leaning close to Darkwing like he might be able to see the difference.

"Yeah, but they're… delicate. More prone to reopening or rebreaking, or whatever. They'll hold if you're desperate, but it's honestly better to wait and get to an actual doctor."

"Can you hit me? Just to know what it feels like!" Gizmo asked, immediately defensive when Donald's eyes snapped to him, and honestly, it was probably a bad idea, but he was tired, and Gizmo looked like he needed to sleep for a week to be functional. It wouldn't hurt anyway, and they already knew he could cast magic, so…

The Donald of a few months ago would be shocked by how casual he

was being about all of this. The Donald of fifteen years ago would be surprised he hadn't said something right away.

"Gizmoduck," he cast, and the green burst over his head. Donald had a brief concern that the armor would cause some issues, but nothing happened except Gizmo sighing, looking infinitely less stressed.

"Oh, that's great. Is it tiring for you to do that?" Donald waved his hand in a so-so way.

"Not really. It would be if I was trying to, say, fix a broken leg or something, but this is just a pick-me-up. Not much more work than making a cup of coffee."

"I have a million questions about that," Gizmo admitted, looking at Donald like he would vanish if he blinked. "But! It is very late, and I need to recalibrate this shield. Can we… can we meet here again to test things? That way you don't have to worry about Dr. Gearloose seeing anything."

Unbidden, Donald's eyes drifted to Uno's computer stand.

But they had already come here, and it would make more sense to continue.

"Here is fine," he replied, "just warn me when you're arriving. Unless you want to add your biometrics to the system, I'll have to let you in." They both nodded. Gizmo glanced around with interest. He opened his mouth to speak, but Darkwing cut him off.

"Say, Gearhead, want to give us a lift back to the harbor? I know I left

my ride back there, and I think PK did too," he said, a bit too casually. Donald squinted at him.

"Oh, sure! I can take you both at once, but it gets a bit loud, fair warning!"

Before Donald could think to protest, they were both scooped up by Gizmo's extending arms, and they were off out of the building into the night sky. He managed to call a command to the tower to shut down before they were airborne, but it was a near thing.

He tried to ask Darkwing what that had been about, but Gizmoduck hadn't been kidding about the noise, and he couldn't get a word in edgewise.

Gizmo dropped him near the harbor, and Darkwing was already commanding him to go another way to drop him off, so Donald was left to get to his car alone.

It was here that he missed the old 313; it had a dedicated space for his costume and equipment, so he didn't have to carefully peel off the mask and cape, bundle them into the back and hope he could get home smoothly without anyone noticing. For a moment, he was tempted to just go straight back to the Tower to sleep, or to just get started on the day (the sun was starting to rise as it was), but the concern about someone noticing he was gone trumped his concerns of getting caught.

Which turned out to be the right choice, as Gladstone was already at the houseboat when he pulled up, holding a cup of coffee and a bag that probably contained a muffin. He looked surprised to see Donald pulling back in; Donald shoved the costume pieces into the glove compartment and yanked on a jacket that had been tossed into the backseat.

“Hey there Don! Early morning?” Gladstone called, holding up the coffee like an offering. Donald took it gratefully, leading the way into the boat, where his work papers were still strewn across the table.

He shoved them haphazardly into his briefcase, falling into his seat.

“Long night actually, I just got back.” He replied without thought, already sipping at his drink, before realizing exactly how that would sound.

“ *Oh?* Do tell!” Glad plopped into the seat across from him with a teasing grin. Donald shook his head.

“Not that. A friend got mugged,” he invented on the fly, hoping Gladstone wouldn’t ask which friend.

“Yeesh, they alright?” He asked instead, and Donald nodded, relieved.

“Everyone’s fine, but they needed a ride home and some company, you know?” He said, and then frowned at the coffee.

“Thank you, by the way. Did I say thank you?” Gladstone laughed.

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” he waved off, “got it for free anyway, I’ve got a rewards account.” Donald peered at him.

“I’m still grateful,” he said carefully, and while Gladstone’s cheery

smile didn't fade, it… softened, slightly. Became more real.

How often did Donald thank him for the things his luck got him? How often did anyone? Gladstone didn't have to work for them, true, but he also didn't have to share.

"And for the pier thing, thank you. It's nice being on the water again," Donald added, and was rewarded by a sheepish expression crossing his cousin's face.

"Yeah, well, I'll get my dues on that at some point. You're taking a fishing trip soon, aren't you?" Donald hadn't planned one yet, but with all the people asking him, he would have to soon, so he nodded.

"Waiting for a bit warmer weather, I think, then we'll all go out. Might get a bit crowded, honestly," he added, considering. Launchpad had mentioned it, hadn't he, and Donald would at least extend the invitation to Drake and Gosalyn. He would have before, but now… he and Drake were friends, even more so than he had thought yesterday.

"Well, look who's popular!" Gladstone teased; Donald rolled his eyes, but he was grinning.

They settled into silence. Donald didn't need to leave just yet, and Gladstone didn't have a job after all, so there was no rush to get moving today.

"How's the building going? It looks like they've got most of the walls up?" Donald asked, and Gladstone lit up.

"Oh, it's going well! Soon they'll have the kitchen done, I'll have to

show you. Got a great deal on these tiles for a backsplash," he enthusiastically explained, more energy than Donald was used to seeing from his cousin. He continued listening as his cousin talked about the status of the plumbing and electric, which were both going smoothly, and how he was starting to think about furniture and paint colors.

It was the most excited he'd seen Gladstone be about much of anything in years. He also seemed more settled, somehow, less likely to just wander off. That could be because of the obvious, Donald supposed, building a house was a more permanent choice than getting a hotel or even renting an apartment.

Still, though, he had to go to work, so with a yawn Donald got changed and left for work. Gladstone looked regretful that he had to leave, but he didn't say anything except wishing him a good day, so Donald let it lie. It had been a long time since they'd been truly close, but Donald was certain that Gladstone would talk when he was ready. If it was Donald he wanted to talk to anyway. If there was anything to even talk about.

His phone chirped as he got to work, but he wasn't able to look at it until he got to his office. 330 wasn't in yet.

Drake: please tell me you didn't go to work today!

Donald: why would i say that

Drake: !!!

Drake: do you even SLEEP?

Donald: no, i run on spite

Drake: teach me your ways, dying rn

Donald laughed, shoving his phone away. He almost wanted to message Gizmoduck and ask how he was faring, but he didn't want to risk waking him up on the small off-chance that he was getting some sleep.

He lost himself in sorting through his prior FOWL bases, dividing them up between possibilities, completely destroyed and currently in use by other parties. He could probably rule out the latter two categories, at least for now. After some consideration he prioritized locations in Europe, since the cells had been sold in Spain, and Dr. Ghast had worked in Germany before moving to Duckburg. They probably wouldn't want to move them that far, given how volatile they were.

He also sent a message to the local team looking into the Blot and informed them of Darkwing's raid from the night before, which they hadn't seen in the morning reports yet. Nobody asked how he knew, but if anyone did his excuse would be that he had been in the area and was nosy; spies generally were, it wouldn't be that unusual.

330 poked his head around the open door frame, clutching some old files to his chest, a laptop bag hanging at his hip.

"Morning Double Duck," he called, stepping inside. Junior agents didn't get their own offices, just desks in their department areas, so 330 didn't have anywhere set aside for him (as Donald didn't technically belong to a department). Donald had countered that by setting up a second desk in his office, which made things more convenient but a bit tight.

“Good morning,” he answered absently, still looking over his list of options, so he didn’t see 330 until he had approached to peer over his shoulder. Donald suppressed a jump.

“Those are old FOWL bases,” he pointed out. Donald nodded, tilting his head so his fellow agent could see better.

“I’m compiling a list of anywhere FOWL could have set up shop after their disappearance,” he explained.

“Wouldn’t they try to find somewhere new? Whoever was left after the raids, I mean,” 330 asked, dragging the other chair closer to look closer.

“Possibly, but they were low on staff and lower on resources, as far as we know. I’m betting they may have moved back into one of the less destroyed locations, at least temporarily,” he said, gesturing at the list of options he’d gathered. “It’s somewhere to start, at least. But first, I wanted to hear your thoughts on the files, since you have fresh eyes.”

330 leaned back, spine going straight. He looked like he was giving a report.

“FOWL seems focused on ways to make money, gather power, or both. Sometimes they seem to target technology or artifacts without a clear motive, but their plans that have gotten further along always seem to be focused on that goal. They certainly have the resources to get the Phantom Blot out of prison, if they’ve recovered to the point that SHUSH suspects, and they could supply him with labs and resources. What isn’t clear is what they would gain from that deal.”

“The Phantom Blot’s goals were more generally power and control, possibly world domination, so that falls in line with FOWL, but in the report there’s a statement that he wanted to rid the world of magic?” Here he hesitated, and Donald nodded.

“Never confirmed why, but he had some sort of grudge against magic in general. Could be simple prejudice, maybe he’s got a personal motive,” Donald said; it was the one thing he’d never figured out, and it rankled. More now, with the Blot out and following those same goals and ideas.

“Right. And FOWL has used artifacts in the past, or at least gone after them, and even a recent incident with Scrooge McDuck and some scroll, so I’m not sure how that would match up,” 330 admitted, like it was a personal failing. Donald nodded.

“It’s a flaw in the theory, if they’re working together. So, if FOWL and the Blot are working together, we need an answer to that at some point,” he said easily. A thought crossed his mind, and he got up to write on the whiteboard on the wall. He hadn’t previously thought he would ever use it, but there they were. He jotted down the question.

“Unless… what if the Blot isn’t willing? We haven’t had any sightings of him, there’s no guarantee he’s willingly working for whoever broke him out,” 330 added, which Donald added to their list.

“He doesn’t look surprised or confused during the transfer footage,” Donald mused, “But that doesn’t mean he was willing, only that he probably knew what was happening.” 330 had pulled out his laptop, and typed a few notes as Donald spoke.

“We really don’t know much yet, do we?” 330 asked when his fingers stopped moving. Donald made a face at the blunt statement, but it was true; they’d found power cells with his metaphorical fingerprints all

over them, but despite so many people hunting for him, they'd had no luck and no leads.

"We've ruled out a lot of things, but no, we don't. The Blot doesn't seem to be targeting any people this time, but whether that's intentional or lack of access… we have more questions than answers," Donald admitted. 330 gave him a shrewd look.

"So, why does the Director want to explore this avenue? We don't have any evidence," he pointed out, and Donald shrugged.

"I offered it as a theory, she wanted to give it a look. At the very least, we should be able to investigate both the Blot and FOWL, so no matter if we prove a connection or not, we'll be gathering information," Donald said, and 330 looked thoughtful.

"She must trust you," he finally said, and Donald shrugged.

"And you, or you would have been assigned elsewhere," Donald pointed out, "There was plenty of interest."

330 grinned widely at him at that.

"I think I got the better end of the stick," he replied simply, and Donald had nothing to say to that, so he just chuckled and shook his head. He'd say that the chicken had no idea what he was getting into, but, well, he'd actually worked a mission with Donald already. If anyone had an idea how to work with him, 330 had the best bet.

"So then, what's our first step?" 330 asked, moving to set his things on the empty desk. Donald walked back to his own seat to tap on his list.

“We’ll start in Spain, there’s an old FOWL base in Barcelona. That’s our first stop.”

Caballeros Reunion Tour

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was Friday. It was Friday and José and Panchito would be here *tonight,* they were already in the air even, and Donald was about to vibrate out of his skin.

He'd let his family know that they were arriving, and received a fairly lackluster response. The kids at least had been excited for him, but weren't interested in anything beyond that. Della seemed amused at Donald's reactions, and Scrooge merely rolled his eyes and reminded him that he didn't want 'those two hooligans' staying at the Manor.

Donald shrugged it off, in too good of a mood to fight about it (although really? Donald didn't even live at the Manor!), and moved on. Launchpad didn't actually know his friends, nor did Bentina, but they both offered congratulations that they had gotten citizenship, Bentina offered to host them all for dinner.

Launchpad was actually the only person that had been excited, both to meet his bandmates and for Donald, which was nice. He was biting his tongue to keep from telling everyone he met that they would be back soon; SHUSH agents at work, Drake, Mickey and Goofy via text, even Gizmoduck. He kept himself under control, but only just, and forced himself to plan the mission to Spain.

It was his first time planning a mission; normally they were assigned to him or he stumbled into the situation and had to plan on the fly. There were rules on how to write the objective, how to budget and enter the details into the mission system, and a number of other small details that he had never had to deal with before.

Pity he would have to fly off almost as soon as the Cabs arrived, but it was how life worked. At the very least, they would have the weekend to themselves before he had to go; he planned to stay at the cabana until Sunday afternoon to celebrate and help them move back in.

Sure, Xandra had helped them transport things, but they hadn't unpacked anything, and Xandra certainly hadn't; she had spent their time apart trying to find a way to break the curse on her atlas. Her newest lead had her traveling to another dimension's massive library for information, and she was hopeful and distracted.

Ari still lived in the cabana with Humphrey, but it would honestly be worse if he'd tried to unpack anything, so hopefully he'd been content to celebrate in his own way instead of trying to be helpful.

The mission plan was completed and submitted, the day was over, and Donald went straight to the airport with an absent-minded wave to 330, who looked amused. Donald had mentioned some friends were coming to town, reasoning that that story was true enough and generic enough that it wouldn't be identifiable.

He was early, and the last message he had was from Panchito, confirming that they were on schedule leaving Mexico City airport a few hours ago. There was nothing for Donald to do except wait. He paced, for a bit, but too many people were watching him, so he settled into an uncomfortable seat with a groan and resorted to checking his watch every few minutes.

He tried to use his phone to distract himself, which worked for a little bit, sorting through more notifications from Tweeter (they hadn't stopped, but with no new posts they had at least slowed down quite a bit), a few emails from SHUSH to confirm his mission, a message from Gizmoduck asking to try the magic shield again, except wait no, he had other things going on, raincheck?

One new message from Morgana, letting him know that she had spread the word far and wide about the Blot, and everyone even remotely involved in the magic community was warned and taking precautions. Mostly moving in groups and not openly doing magic, since the Bot had often gone after street magicians and fortune tellers with a reputation for being true. It wasn't much, but it was something at least.

A few messages from the kids saying to say hi to the Cabs when they arrived, since he'd said he wouldn't be home this weekend, one joking one from Lena asking for their signatures 'since youre so famous now,' and then his inbox was empty, and he'd replied to all his emails, and the plane still hadn't landed.

He really should have brought a book, Donald thought, and wondered if there was a shop in this part of the airport. Not that he really trusted himself to be able to pay attention to a book right now. None of the games the boys had downloaded onto his phone held any interest for him, and the only TV screen in the room was playing a sitcom from the sixties without subtitles; even if he wanted to watch, the noise of the room was more than enough to drown it out.

He took to people watching, which somewhat soothed his nervous energy, eyes darting from person to person as they arrived and left, bags in hand, some exhausted, others excited. There were children running wildly around jetlagged parents, businessmen and women with only a garment bag with them, hurrying out with a phone in one hand. A few teenagers in a clump across the airport, who kept glancing his way with curiosity. Donald wondered if he had something on his face, or if he looked as frantic as he felt, tapping his fingers on the seat in some complex rhythm.

Tapping turned to humming, mostly lost under the drone of noise, as he watched the doors for arrivals. At one point he realized what he was humming was 'The Three Caballeros,' and had to shake his head at himself, but didn't stop.

A new crowd of people exited the airport, and Donald looked up quickly, scanning for bright feathers. Funny, usually when he was doing that he was searching in collapsing rubble, or dense jungles. Not a crowd of tired travelers laden with suitcases.

Then he spotted red feathers and a sombrero and stopped thinking entirely, throwing himself towards the figure with single-minded determination.

“Donal’!” Panchito shouted, and they caught each other in a twirling hug, Donald nearly falling as his feet left the ground before Panchito’s arms tightened.

There was a moment, one moment, when they looked into each other’s eyes, grinning wildly, and then they were kissing, beaks pressed tightly together. Donald’s hands went to grasp the sides of Panchito’s face while Panchito gripped his waist.

Panchito tipped him backwards. Donald’s hand caught the sombrero before it could fall to the floor, muscle memory taking over. He felt Panchito smile against his beak, and found himself smiling back, before the world righted and he was standing again, grinning at Panchito’s bright expression.

“Panchito! I see that you found him, but we intended to have a conversation first, yes?” José’s voice called out, amused and fond, and Donald, caught up in the moment, pulled free to grab José instead. His hands clasped around Zé’s back and neck, pressing their beaks together while José giggled against him, hands creeping behind his back.

He felt giddy and ridiculous, while José pulled back to kiss him again on his cheek and Panchito grabbed them both in a hug. Donald’s feet left the floor again, and his spine cracked in the tight grip.

“Chito! Air!” He protested on a laugh, and was set back down with another laugh.

“We did intend to talk to you first, you know,” José said sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. Panchito didn’t look remotely regretful.

“Yes, si, of course we will! But how could I resist? The moment, the passion! I was caught up in it!” So saying, he batted his eyes at José, who glanced at Donald in commiseration. Donald couldn’t stop grinning.

“I want to have that conversation too,” Donald replied, “when we get you two settled in. Come on!” And he grabbed both of their hands (he could do that now! They were *here!*) and dragged the pair out of the airport.

“Wait, did you have luggage?”

Once they had bags sorted out and in the car, Donald drove them all to the cabana, while José and Panchito filled him in on their recent move. They’d both climbed in back, joking about Donald being their chauffeur. Donald welcomed the distance, he needed to focus on the road.

The doors all but burst open as they approached, hauling the last few suitcases with them to the cabana, revealing Ari and Humphrey. Ari was trilling some new song, darting around them with rapid hugs and flapping hands, while Humphrey herded them inside like an eager puppy.

The cabana was crowded by boxes and miscellaneous packages, piled against the walls and on the few remaining pieces of furniture. They were going to need a new coffee table at some point; their original one was a scrap of wood stacked on cinder blocks.

Donald's coat got tossed to the side, pizza got ordered, and they attached the piles of boxes with fervor and no direction. José and Ari started in the kitchen, since those boxes had ended up on top, while Donald tackled getting the bedrooms prepped. Ari and Humphrey slept in the same giant blanket nest in their own room, but the Cabs' rooms hadn't been used in years. Once he had blankets in the wash, he came back out to find Panchito pulling memorabilia from their old adventures out of storage to display around the bookshelves, loudly crowing whenever he found something fun.

"Look, look! Our prison uniforms from goblin jail!"

"Why did we *keep* those?" Donald replied, baffled, as Panchito pulled them out of an old box with a laugh.

"We should frame one!" He suggested, ignoring Donald's question entirely. José laughed from the kitchen, and Ari was singing something ridiculous, and all Donald could do was roll his eyes.

"Make sure they were washed first," he finally ordered, and Panchito gasped dramatically, clutching one of the shirts to his chest.

"But, Donal'! The smell is part of the memories! We cannot wash them!"

"Wash them or I'm never spending the night, Panchito."

“Ah, well, we do not need to keep everything,” he replied immediately, tossing the pile into an empty box with a shrug. Humphrey, lying nearby, sniffed the box and scowled, kicking it further away.

“Have either of you found my blender?” José called, leaning through the doorway to glance at them. Donald shook his head, Panchito shrugged.

“There’s a box labeled kitchen over by the bathroom door?” He offered, but it turned out that that box actually held José’s sketchbooks and watercolor paints. The box stating it held art supplies was actually an assortment of paperwork, and the blender eventually turned up mixed with the bath towels.

Donald didn’t even say anything, just gave José a raised eyebrow, and got a swat in the arm in reaction.

“Xandra was in a rush, I didn’t wish to delay her!” He protested, but he was laughing as he said it, while Panchito carefully put the blender in the linen closet with a decisive nod.

“Ah, we’re going to have a lot of trouble finding things these next few weeks,” José concluded, just then realizing that Panchito had been unpacking the main rooms. Donald snorted.

“Just the next few weeks? You don’t remember finding the shampoo in the fridge every time Panchito bought groceries?”

“I wanted to get everything put away fast! I thought it was a bottle of sauce!”

“What about the remote in the bathroom?” Donald challenged.

“I… don’t have an excuse for that.”

It was like this the night through; they were loud, singing and yelling, finding lost things from their college days and laughing at what Panchito had thought to save. Pizza was eaten with napkins because the table was covered by José’s towels and washcloths, Humphrey vanished into his room to snooze while Ari played music on whatever instruments he found as they worked.

It had always been like this, and Donald was in the best mood he’d been in for weeks, months, maybe even years. He loved his boys, but he regretted how much he’d let himself lose contact with his friends. His friends, and the Caballeros, because they’re more than friends, really, even before the airport. Before they’d started dating, they had fought monsters and warlocks, bonded in danger and in late nights arguing over cards, and those bonds were fireforged by lava lizards and Donald’s own terrible temper.

Ari crashed late, sleepily peeping as he walked to his shared nest, while they continued unpacking. Not that there was much left; four of them made it fast work, no matter how chaotic, and soon there was a cardboard stack by the door and the cabana was a cluttered, homey mess. Donald almost wished it was the three of them again, but he knew, come morning, he would miss his kids and his boat.

They lived close; José planned to get a car soon anyway, the distance was now just under a half hour instead of half a day in the air.

“So, should we have that conversation now?” Donald finally asked, when he’d taken the last of the sheets out of the wash and made the beds. It was the last task, and judging by Panchito carefully dusting the already clean shelves, they all knew it.

The room went quiet as they settled on the worn down couch; Donald took one side so he could look at them both.

“It sounded like you already had a plan,” he offered to the room at large, eyeing his two friends. They grinned sheepishly back at him.

“Well, when we were planning the move back north, it did come up,” José replied, waving a hand lazily around him. Panchito leaned around so he could see them both, nearly leaning off the couch altogether.

“And we of course found that we are both still very much in love, and we are a trio, not just a duo! So the next question was of course how you felt,” Panchito added.

“But, well, we wanted to ask in person; phones are good, but not the same as face to face, yes? So, we waited until we were back together to discuss,” José finished cheerfully.

“And then, I get to the airport and what do I see? Our Donal’ in a suit and tie! How could I resist?” Panchito exclaimed, falling backwards against the couch in a faint, hand pressed against his forehead. Donald rolled his eyes, but José was nodding along sagely. He reached over and tugged on Donald’s shirt collar; his tie had long since been abandoned back in the car.

“You look very handsome in your suit,” he agreed, and Donald felt his face go red. He should be immune to this by now, he really should, and yet… José grinned and pressed a hand to Donald’s cheek.

“Ah, I can still make you blush it seems!” He crowed. Donald shoved

at his hand with a playful scowl.

“This isn’t the conversation I was expecting,” he said pointedly. José took his hand away with a pout, but he nodded in agreement.

“Well, we just wish to… try again. We cannot return to how things were before, but I believe we all want to travel in a similar direction,” José said carefully, almost rehearsed. Donald squinted at his friend, and realized that despite his usual calm demeanor, he was nervous.

Well. That wouldn’t do.

Donald took a page out of his friend’s book and tossed himself into José’s lap with a flirtatious smile. Granted, it was probably more funny than alluring, but that wasn’t the point.

“Are you asking me on a *date?”* He asked, as innocently as he could. “We haven’t even held *hands* yet!”

José snorted a surprised laugh while Panchito cackled. Donald smirked, pleased.

“We’ve done a bit more than that,” José purred, and Donald fluttered his eyelashes at him, eliciting another laugh from them both. He held up his hand as an offer, Panchito grabbed it before José could reach out, and a mock struggle broke out above Donald’s head. Used to it, he laid still and waited until they were both clinging to him, feeling smothered in the best way.

“The answer is yes, just to be completely clear,” he said after a few minutes, and two beaming faces descended towards him. The three of

them had perfected the art of peppering kisses on each other without smacking into someone else, and it seemed that they were still in good practice.

Eventually, Donald was giggling, as their beaks were more tickling than kissing, and fought his way clear of the pile. He hit the floor awkwardly, nearly flipping the table, but managed to get his feet under him after a moment and stood.

“We do need to decide some other things,” he pointed out, when the hands still clinging to his tugged at him. Panchito pouted, while José waved his free hand airily.

“True, yes. Boundaries, any changes, how to do things when two of us live here and one does not. But we do have the weekend, and much of our unpacking is done! Surely we can enjoy the evening first?”

And, well, Donald had no issue with that, so he let himself fall back onto the couch.

It’s like this: Donald’s phone had been shoved into his suit pocket at the airport, and in the bustle of the day he’d lost track of it. It was only when he went to charge it that he realized the issue and went hunting for the discarded item, leaving the cuddle pile with regret.

His phone was filled with missed calls and messages, and his blood went cold. Frantic, he unlocked it and went to the first one he saw, from Della.

Della: wtf bro! Since when are you dating anyone???

Della: the kids didnt even know!

Della: answer me!

Donald: what are you talking about?!

He went to another conversation before she responded, Louie was next.

Louie: i thought you said you would tell us if you were dating someone.

Louie: that still counts if theres TWO somebodies uncle donald!

Donald went from cold as ice to heated in an instant, angry and embarrassed all at once. He hadn't lied, he was planning on telling them as soon as he- well, today had been a surprise, but he'd planned on talking to the boys after this if anything happened.

What was going on?

Dewey: sice wen are you gay?

Unca Donald: I'm bisexual Dewey, and I have told you that. Can you please tell me what's going on?

Dewey: …

Dewey: you took hours to answer and THATS yor first question?????

Donald sighed and continued scrolling.

Huey: uncle Donald, there's a video of you going viral all over the place; it looks like you, Panchito and Jose? At the airport

Oh.

Oh no.

Chapter End Notes

There's fanart of this chapter! Go look!

https://www.tumblr.com/kiiwiighost/728147619457695744/heres-a-fanart-i-did-for-an-amazing-fanfic-i-read

Fame is a Fickle Friend

Donald started typing again.

Uncle Donald: what video

Huey: link

Donald hesitated, glancing at his distracted partners, took a breath, and clicked the link.

He was taken to Tweeter, where a short video started immediately.

‘this is so cute omg???’ was the caption, and on screen Donald saw himself and Panchito, twirling around and kissing, then Donald tackling José with a broad grin. Their faces weren’t super clear, but if you knew who you were looking at…

Ah phooey.

In the comments, near the top, someone had said ‘wait, isnt that the 3 caballeros?’ and linked to their band page. Things had clearly exploded from there, while the three of them had been unpacking and not checking their phones.

Donald watched the video long enough for it to loop, and again, and again, feeling exposed and nauseous. Fingers numb, he backed out of the page and opened a group chat between him and the boys. It was rarely used, but he needed to reach them all, and clearly they were

near their phones.

Uncle Donald: Huey sent me the link to the video that I'm assuming you all saw. I'm sure you're all angry right now, but let me explain a bit

Uncle Donald: José and Panchito and I used to date, in college. We broke up before you three were born

Uncle Donald: when we all got to the airport, we all just got caught up in things; we weren't dating

Dewey: that sure looked like dating to me!

Louie: same

Uncle Donald: we are dating now, as of an hour ago; we needed to have a conversation about it before making any decisions

Uncle Donald: I planned to talk to you when i got home, but clearly that isn't an option right now

Dewey: so you guys decided to date again, and they MOVED to new quackmore just because?

Uncle Donald: they moved before we talked. Like i said, we wanted to talk in person before we decided anything

Uncle Donald: I promise i was going to talk to you as soon as something

actually happened

Louie: and thats why you didnt mention you used to date them before? Cause that sounds like BS to me

Just this once, Donald didn't call him out on the borderline swearing.

Uncle Donald: i havent mentioned most of the people i used to date. Its not usually something you need to know, and in the case of Chito and Zé, we were friends first. When you met them we were old friends more than old ex-boyfriends

Huey: Can we meet them? Again, I mean

Louie: rly huey?

Huey: Well I want to know them better if they're dating uncle Donald!

Dewey: same. i want to kno whats so great about them

Uncle Donald: I can set something up for everyone to talk, thats fine

Louie: just us first though

Louie: i want it to just be the 4 of us

Dewey: saaame

Huey: I agree

Uncle Donald: ok. I'll be home Sunday, is that ok?

Louie: …

Dewey: what if we say no?

Huey: sunday is fine

Uncle Donald: Dewey?

Dewey: what if we want you to come home early?

Donald paused, frowning over his phone. He could, unpacking hadn't taken as long as he'd thought (though it was very late, and why were the boys still up anyway?).

His boys came first. The Cabs would understand.

Uncle Donald: then i can come home early

There was a long wait for an answer, and Donald could hear some movement from the living room. He shuffled to the kitchen for a bit of

space, unwilling to have company at the moment.

Huey: sunday is fine

Louie: yeah

Dewey: fine

Dewey: but we want chili for dinner

Uncle Donald: i can do that

Uncle Donald: now, its late, you three should be in bed

Uncle Donald: I love you, I'll see you sunday

Huey: goodnight! Love you

Louie: gn

Dewey: …

Dewey: love you

Donald took a breath, but he still had messages to deal with.

Webby: was that the three caballeros at the airport with you?

Webby: are you all in love?

Webby: IS THAT WHY YOU BROKE UP WITH DAISY???

Uncle Donald: yes, yes, and no

Uncle Donald: Daisy and I broke up because we were a bad fit, I didnt start dating panchito and jose until a while later.

Webby: thats so cool!

Webby: congrats! hdl said you just started dating again!

Uncle Donald: thanks Webby, I appreciate it

Uncle Donald: are they okay?

Webby: i think so? They seem fine now, they were weird earlier

Webby: not mad, just… bothered, maybe? Cause they thought you were lying when you said you werent dating anyone

Webby: I thought it was just the romance of the moment that you got caught up in, but they thought you were hiding something i guess

Uncle Donald: well i can confirm you were right

Uncle Donald: thank you

Uncle Donald: good night, i love you

Webby: oh, its not that late yet! I have research to do!

Uncle Donald: Webby. Get some sleep

Webby: fiiiiine, good night uncle donald!

Webby: ❤

Four down, and oh so many to go.

LP: so, i want to say congrats

LP: cause i found out you have two boyfriends!

LP: or whatever title you guys choose

LP: but i dont think you meant anyone to find out??

DD: no i didnt, and we just got together today

DD: well, back together

DD: but i didnt plan on it being a secret or anything

DD: so thank you

LP: so, now we can go on double dates???

LP: or, wait , is it a double date if there are three of you??

DD: i would love to LP, ill ask the others

And the next:

Bentina: Well, I imagine that was not intentional

Bentina: Nevertheless, congratulations and I wish you well.

Bentina: The children are a bit troubled, you should know

Donald: I just talked to them, but i appreciate it

Bentina: that took you longer than usual to respond

Donald: got distracted, left my phone in my jacket and didnt see any of this until just now

Bentina: Ah. You should also know your sister and uncle have seen the video as well

Bentina: Della, I haven't seen in a while, so I can't attest to her emotional state, but your uncle was in a mood

Donald: …

Donald: thanks for the warning

Donald had a missed call from Scrooge. He also had a voicemail.

He went back to Della's messages next.

Della: the video???

Donald: i just found out

Donald: we decided to start dating a few hours ago della, i wasnt keeping secrets

Della: and that scene in the airport?

Donald: what can i say, i guess im irresistible in a suit

Della: omg don, really?

Donald: you asked

Della: seriously tho, youre dating 2 people???

Donald: ive done it before

Della: what

Della: WHAT

Della: WHAT???!?!?

Donald: we dated in college until you laid the boys' eggs

Donald: actually a bit longer, but long distance wasnt working out

Della: what the fuck donald

Donald: ???

Della: you were dating them for that long and never said a thing???!?

Donald: … yeah, i am sorry about not saying anything the first time

Donald: i didnt know how you or scrooge were gonna react

Donald: still dont know about old man $$ tbh

Della: omg odl man $, calling him that forever now

*Della: *old*

Della: anyway

Della: you know im totally okay with it, right?

Della: just surprised, but 100% supportive!

Donald: thanks dell

Donald: i talked to the kids btw

Della: oh good, i had NO idea how to do that

Della: you coming hme sunday?

Donald: yeah, and then i have to fly out for work

Della: well THATS bad timing

Della: going anywhere fun?

Donald: spain, but i doubt i get to go sightseeing or anything. Just a long flight and then boring meetings

Della: boo!

Della: so… you doing ok?

Donald: … feeling a bit exposed; who takes a video of some stranger and just posts it???

Donald: but I'll be ok

Donald: more worried about the boys at this point

Della: ah, theyll get over it

Della: guess they were just shocked you had any game lol

Donald: rude

But he was smiling as he sent it, and breathed easier.

“Donal’?” Panchito asked, poking his head around the corner. Donald glanced up, and winced. Right, they didn’t know.

“Apparently someone took a video of us at the airport and posted it online. My whole family saw it,” he explained, and Panchito winced, stepping closer.

“Are you okay? Your sobrinos?” Donald nodded, pulling up the clip and passing his phone over.

“I’m fine. The boys are… they’ll be fine. They want to meet you guys again, probably something less dangerous than a carnivorous plant city. Maybe dinner?”

“Knowing us, it will end up also trying to kill us,” José replied, stepping into the room as well and peering over Panchito’s shoulder. Donald snorted a laugh.

“We can try at least. Maybe later this week, I have to fly to Spain on

Monday," he said. Two pairs of curious eyes looked back at him.

José and Panchito knew he had a classified position in some agency back in college, even if they didn't know the details. It had been hard to keep a secret, and harder still to keep Xandra from just showing up at his work to drag him on a mission. Telling had been the only solution. He could tell them. (What an odd concept, still, being able to talk to others about his life!)

He actually needed to, come to think of it.

"I'm working on an investigation for SHUSH, ever heard of them?" He asked, as casually as he could manage under the circumstances. He got two headshakes, so it hardly mattered.

"I am guessing it is that agency you worked for in college?" José offered, and Donald nodded.

"The Phantom Blot escaped prison, I'm part of the team hunting him down," he said lowly, and *that* got their attention.

"The Phantom Blot? Escaped? When?" Panchito asked, startlingly serious. Donald sighed.

"A year ago, give or take. We just found out a few months ago, I think? It's been hectic," he said, and slumped against the table. José gave him a concerned look.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" He asked, sitting at the table. Donald let himself slip into another seat, and Panchito finished the trio, sliding his phone back over. Donald shoved it into his pocket.

“One thing, if you’re willing. SHUSH doesn’t have any magic experts, and… I don’t want them knowing, about me. It would potentially expose my identity, and I don’t really trust them not to want to use that, with me as an agent and all,” he explained, and felt guilty about even thinking about asking them to take the risk instead. He should be able to find a solution on his own, not bring in other people!

“I can go in,” José offered immediately, because of course he did. Donald knew he would offer. The guilt settled heavy in his guilt.

Panchito could use magic, was naturally talented at it in fact, but he was powerful and not always controlled about it. José had known about his magic long before becoming a Caballero, and would be able to present it better. He was good at speaking to people, good at convincing them.

“Being on record with them could expose you too,” he pointed out, “Even if SHUSH doesn’t try to recruit you, that’s a lot of agents knowing your name.”

“You could wear a mask,” Panchito said reasonably, grinning when Donald’s eyes snapped to him. “It works for me! And your local heroes!”

José nodded, smiling. He looked a bit excited at the idea, actually.

“Do not worry about me. Would it help, having someone come in?” And yes, it would. Donald nodded.

“Then I will do it, and I will take precautions to be safe. Will you be there?”

“Maybe; I’ll try to be, but I’m in a different branch than the people you’d probably be talking to, so I don’t know,” he replied, and José patted him on the shoulder.

“Do not worry Donald, we will find a solution. I am a grown parrot, I can go myself if needed. It may be better if you are elsewhere, in fact,” he added with a wink, “or I may be tempted to flirt while you are in your suit and tie.” Donald felt warm, and shoved at José’s arm. Panchito pouted.

“I also want to see Donal’ at work! We should both go!”

Trust Panchito to break the tension with all the subtlety of a baseball bat. Donald laughed, more relief than actual amusement, and the others joined him until they were all giggling into the table, slumped and exhausted.

“Well, I vote we go to sleep. We have all of tomorrow to chat and have very serious conversations,” José proposed, and he stood with a determined look towards the bedrooms on the lower level.

Donald had his own room, still left after all these years, but they all walked towards Panchito’s room, which had the nicest bed, everyone agreed.

It was only as Donald was in the bathroom that he remembered he hadn’t listened to Scrooge’s call yet. After a longing look at the bed, he stepped into the hallway to listen to the voicemail. His hands hesitated over the screen for several moments. The message wasn't going to go anywhere. No matter how much he wished it would.

“Donald, you bilgesnipe, you had better answer me and explain what this is about!”

Not a great start, and it didn’t get better. Donald genuinely couldn’t understand most of it, lost to grumbling and shrill shouting. At times he didn’t even think Scrooge was still yelling at the phone, lost in his rage and forgetting the device he was using.

“If those degenerates *think they’ll be allowed anywhere near the Manor they have another thing coming!”*

Donald didn’t hear the rest. He stood in the middle of the hallway, phone clutched in his hand, and stared at the rock wall. He saw nothing. The word ‘degenerates’ ran through his head on a loop.

He’d never told Scrooge about anyone he dated. He’d found out about Daisy, eventually, and hadn’t had much to say, but that was the only time. Donald had never wanted to know what he would say.

“Donald?” A hand gently took the phone from his hands. The recording asked if he wanted to replay the message, save it or delete it.

“Don’t listen to that,” he warned quietly. “You don’t need to hear it.”

“I think I do,” José said quietly, and the recording restarted. Donald closed his eyes.

“-can’t believe you, the nerve-” was all he could make out before José stopped it and deleted the message.

“It seems Scrooge does not approve,” he offered in a low tone, and all Donald could do was nod.

“I guess so.”

Donald let himself be dragged to bed; he didn’t want to think anymore.

Two Steps Back

The morning dawned cloudy and gray, which suited Donald just fine as he slipped downstairs to make breakfast. He let himself get caught up in the steps of mixing batter and making pancakes, but his mind was elsewhere.

Degenerates. He didn't know why that word in particular was staying with him. Scrooge had called José and Panchito lazy good-for-nothings more than he had used their names; insults weren't uncommon. Donald himself had been called a loafer and a parasite before, a coward so many times he responded to it like his own name. But all of those were… different, somehow.

Maybe because they were true, in a way? Not that he thought any of them were lazy, but they didn't have the same mentality as Scrooge, who thought any moment of relaxation was a moment wasted. Everyone on the planet was lazy in Scrooge's opinion, at least compared to himself. Donald wasn't the kind of person to run directly into danger unless he had to, and Scrooge had seen that as cowardice. It was expected.

But degenerate. That was a different thing entirely. That hurt.

Corrupt. Immoral. What had they done to deserve those titles, he had to wonder. Was it because they didn't have an office job, a 9-5 gig that offered stability and room for growth. Instead they worked as a flight attendant and musician, which offered the opportunity to travel, José's lifelong dream, and the chance to play music, Panchito's passion in life. But those things weren't what Scrooge would care about, because they didn't pay well.

Or was it simpler. They were all men, and they were dating each other. Which factor would be worse to Scrooge? What thing had

tipped him over the edge?

Launchpad was dating another man, and that didn't seem to bother Scrooge. Was it the poly aspect?

Or was it just Donald himself?

Scrooge had said degenerates. He hadn't specified which of them he was referring to.

He sighed, tried to think about other things. They needed to plan José's trip to SHUSH, since that seemed to be happening, and how dating was going to go after so many years apart. They still needed to get rid of the boxes, make sure everything Panchito and Ari had put away had actually been put away and not on random shelves, stock up the kitchen… it was going to be a busy day.

"Buenos días! It's so nice to have company in the morning!" Panchito called out as he strolled into the kitchen, smile wide and bright, tugging a shirt over his head. Donald couldn't help but smile back, stress melting just a bit.

"And breakfast! Truly a great morning!" He continued to crow, kissing Donald on the cheek and stealing a pancake from the plate. Donald swatted at him out of reflex, but he dodged with a muffled chuckle.

"You have plates you can use," he pointed out, gesturing towards the cabinet. Panchito glanced at it, a quizzical look on his face.

"Didn't that one have spare arrows?" He asked; Donald turned to squint at it.

“Maybe? It had plates this morning anyway.” Panchito scratched his head, then shrugged it off and stole another pancake.

José slept late on a good day, and the day before likely left him jetlagged, so it was no surprise that he was nowhere to be seen even when they had both finished eating. Donald wrapped up the remaining pancakes for later. Ari and Humphrey hadn’t emerged either, but Donald had no idea what their schedule was, so that could be normal. Their snoring spelled out where they were at least.

Donald’s phone was a lead weight in his hands. There were more messages, mostly from friends, which he at least could look at and respond to as he fell onto the couch. Scrooge’s contact sat untouched; he hadn’t sent anything else, and Donald hadn’t responded.

“Ah, Scrooge did not approve, I heard,” Panchito offered, sitting next to him gingerly. Donald forced a casual shrug.

“Something like that. I couldn’t understand all of what he said, to be honest, and José deleted the message, so…” Panchito nodded.

“I don’t think you needed to keep it,” he offered simply. Donald couldn’t disagree.

Still, he opened a chat, just for a moment. Scrooge never texted, it was likely he wouldn’t even see it, but it felt good to get a response out. Finish the conversation.

Donald: Message received

He closed the chat. Took a breath. Replied to his friends' congratulations with enthusiasm, as much as he could muster, and as José woke up, he hunted down the video that had started all of this and made one last message before they started on their own plans.

donald_duck: i appreciate people being enthusiastic, but please remember that posting videos of people without their knowledge isn't appropriate. I wasnt out to my entire family yet, and would have liked to have the choice of how to have that conversation

And with that he tossed his phone to the side. He'd spent enough time on it this weekend.

José insisted on wearing a disguise to SHUSH. He was in fact very excited to do so, and wouldn't show Donald what he planned to use. Donald should probably stop him, but the idea was so hysterical in the moment he couldn't bring himself to say a word.

Director Ravenson was delighted by his email confirming his 'guest' coming in, responding in moments with an affirmative that she would set up a training seminar; he was invited, but depending on his mission in Spain he didn't know if he would make it.

God he hoped he was able to make it.

It lifted his spirits a bit, as did going out to replace the furniture that was beyond repair. They went through thrift stores and cheap consignment shops; adults they might be, but cheap they all still were, especially after moving. The new coffee table was a bit scratched and worn, but the wood was solid and it had a wide shelf underneath that could hold blankets. Which was good, as they had acquired several new ones (the old ones were now part of Ari's nest).

It was fun, wandering store aisles and trying to convince José they definitely needed a gaudy elephant statue; José was the only one of them that had any interior decorating taste. His scowl was more than worth the effort, made better by Panchito getting so attached to the thing that they actually bought it.

"That is not going in our living room," José grumbled, while Panchito clutched the ugly thing with a pleased expression. Donald didn't speak, too busy trying not to laugh.

Grocery shopping somehow got more chaotic; Panchito was cheerfully tossing anything that sounded interesting into the cart, José was planning elaborate meals and recipes, and Donald was desperately trying to get them to pick up basics. They were all moderately successful, and the cart was overfilled with boxes and packages, apples and tomatoes threatening to spill out the top.

The trunk was full, Panchito was in front with Donald loudly singing along with whatever songs he knew on the radio, and Donald felt content. He'd be back at the houserboat tomorrow, making dinner for his boys. It would start awkward, as a lot of important conversations did, but they would be fine.

He resolutely didn't think about the Manor. His phone, still buzzing constantly with well wishes and apologies for how the news had spread, lacked any contact from Scrooge.

There was one from Gladstone that he almost choked over, when he finally broke down and checked again, anxious.

Gladstone: so… is 'mugged' slang for something? ;)

Donald: what

Donald: no!

Donald: why tf would i lie about that

Gladstone: ;) ;) ;) ;)

Donald: fuck off

Gladstone: you kissing your boyfriends with that mouth???

Donald: yes.

Donald: theyve heard worse

Gladstone: :O

Gladstone: congrats btw, sorry about it being spread all over the planet

Gladstone: who knew you were famous enough to get recognized?

Donald: yeah, just my luck

“What are you growling about?” José asked, snagging his phone while Donald grumbled. He made a half-hearted attempt to keep it, and

when that failed, slumped back into his seat while José read the whole thing aloud. He gave Gladstone a ridiculous German accent for unknown reasons, and tried to imitate Donald's angry screech with minimal success.

"What does he mean, mugging?" José asked, while Panchito was still in hysterics. Donald took the opportunity to snatch back his phone and lock it.

"I was late getting home a few days ago and he thought I was on a date," he explained, "I told him a friend got mugged." José's eyebrows rose at that.

"That sounds like a lie," Panchito offered from the floor, where he had fallen earlier and was now lounging, as though he had meant to be there the entire time.

"A friend was in a fight, and I went to help him out. I may have fudged a few details," Donald said carefully. José's eyebrows rose higher still, and Panchito paused to peer at him closer.

"I am familiar with your half-truths," José replied, leaning towards him, "You may avoid answering all you like, but we know that is not the whole story." Panchito nodded. Donald flushed, guilty.

He probably knew the two of them better than anyone else in the world, barring his kids. And he would say with confidence that they knew him better than most, too. Certainly more than his family, who knew nothing about the Caballeros, about Kingdom Hearts, about Paperinik and SHUSH… And his other friends, who all had parts of the puzzle, but never the whole thing. José and Panchito had more pieces than most, but even they lacked the whole picture.

Was it right to be in a relationship that still had so many secrets? Darkwing knew about his identity as Paperinik, Bentina knew about Double Duck and even a bit about the Kingdom Hearts dimension, Mickey and Goofy knew more, of course… Shouldn't he trust Panchito and José more?

It wasn't that he didn't trust them, either; it was just that awful, raw feeling he got at the idea of telling about everything, like if they saw all that he was, the mystique would be gone, and they would be left with just Donald. And what was Donald without his masks? His layers of identities and skills that he hid and displayed to different people, nobody seeing the whole of it.

Zé and Chito both knew he had secrets; would they be interested in a Donald without them?

Some of what he was thinking clearly showed on his face, based on José's growing distress and Panchito's abrupt scrambling to get up, grabbing at Donald's knees in his haste.

"Donal', cariño, what is it?" He demanded, face rising to stare at Donald closer, beaks nearly touching. José moved closer, sitting next to Donald and taking his hands. His movements were smoother than Panchito's, but no less concerned.

"Hah, just- it's nothing. You're right, I'm not telling you the whole truth. It's not my secret, though, not fully," he confessed, and José squeezed his hands.

"You do not need to tell us anything." He said, slow and clear, and Panchito nodded.

"We know you have your secrets, we are not troubled by it!" Panchito

added, folding his arms over Donald's knees and resting his chin on them.

"But if you ever want to speak about any of it, even if you must fudge details, we are here," José added. Donald appreciated it, but he knew he was avoiding the issue by blaming Darkwing for this secret. He could easily tell them parts of the truth, he just- couldn't.

And yet, secrets pressed at his throat, wanting to be released into the air. Constant pressure, so many secrets and masks and half-truths all wanting to be revealed.

"Fenton knows I have magical training," he admitted, "Drake too. It just- it came up recently, I guess." Two people in on it, Drake also knew who he was under the cape… it felt like every minute he was losing ground on the layers he'd wrapped himself up in.

"Ah- remind me who they are?" Panchito asked, looking lost, and Donald chuckled, a bit manic. Right, they hadn't been in the country.

"Fenton works with Gyro at McDuck Enterprises; he's working on a magic shield for the heroes, and I was helping them set up the sensor. Drake… that's harder to explain; it was necessary." He paused, considering. "Well, no, he's the one that was in a fight."

"Ah! You had to rescue him in some way and he found out?" José guessed. Close enough, Donald mused, and he nodded.

"That's our Donal'! Always ready to jump in to help, no matter what!" Panchito cheered. Donald snorted, shaking his head.

“That’s not really-”

“You left your date to save us, and we were barely even friends at the time!” José interrupted, tapping his beak with a grin. Donald’s eyes crossed to watch.

“Not to mention you helped catch the Phantom Blot, and are doing so again!” Panchito added.

“And being a Caballero in general.”

“And I have my suspicions about-”

“Alright, alright!” Donald cut in, face flaming, and they both stopped to grin at him.

“I love your blush,” Panchito sighed, slumping back onto his arms to stare at Donald’s face with a goofy grin.

“You both almost match!” José crowed with a matching grin, which did *not* help Donald’s face in the slightest, and Panchito lunged forward to grab Donald’s face to hold them cheek to cheek, staring at José with intense focus.

“Really?!”

“Yes, you are twins!” José insisted, while Donald rolled his eyes, but didn’t bother struggling.

“I’ve already got one, thanks,” he quipped, unable to keep a smile from crossing his face. Panchito nuzzled the side of his face and released him.

“I will have to settle for matching lovers, then,” he said easily. Donald leaned back, ignoring the odd angle of his spine.

“Launchpad invited us on a double date, by the way,” he tossed out after a moment, bracing himself just before Panchito launched himself backwards to look Donald in the eye again, while José’s eyes opened wide with interest.

“Oh, Launchpad is your pilot friend, yes? Who is he dating?”

“Drake Mallard,” Donald answered, then realized he’d never said who that even was. “They met on the set of the Darkwing Movie that never got finished; he’s an actor.”

“I bet he will have interesting stories!” Panchito replied enthusiastically, gesturing widely with a broad grin. José nodded in agreement.

“He’s also got a daughter, Gosalyn. The kids are all friends, so you’ll probably meet her soon too,” Donald added thoughtfully.

“Does she call you uncle Donald yet?” José asked innocently; Donald swatted at him and stuck out his tongue. Panchito giggled, trying and failing to muffle the sound in his collar.

“Just because I know her doesn’t mean I adopted her!” He insisted, knowing it was a lost cause when José only raised his eyebrows.

“Really? What about the girls?”

“I was dating their aunt for years, it made sense!”

“And Max?” Panchito asked from where he had settled on the floor.

“Goofy and I have been friends since before he was born!”

“Oswald’s kids?”

“Same answer,” Donald replied, scowling.

“Yakko, Wakko and Dot?”

“I helped Bugs finalize the adoption, we’re close!”

“Wait, what about Trip-” José began, before Donald cut him off with a shout.

“Alright, I get it!” They both laughed at his frustration; he decided on the very mature action of smacking them both with a pillow.

The drive home Sunday morning was long, and quiet, especially compared to the last two days. Donald found himself gripping the steering wheel and gritting his teeth, wishing for the drive to be done.

He'd gotten nothing but radio silence from the boys since Friday. This wasn't terribly unusual, but after Friday's debacle it made him nervous. He hoped the boys were just bothered that they hadn't known about his relationship, and there wasn't anything deeper wrong. It grated on him that he hadn't seen their faces yet, that he only had their texts and a few second-hand reports about how they were feeling. He almost regretted not leaving right away to see them, no matter that they had said they were fine waiting to talk to him.

The beach was empty when he pulled in, no sign of Gladstone or any of his family. The only company was the shell of a bungalow, tarps and plastic shifting in the breeze.

He texted the boys to let them know he was home, hoping to avoid the Manor for another few days at least.

'...those degenerates...!'

He shook his head and went inside to start making chili. His recipe took a few hours to cook, and there was prep work to do first; it was something to take his mind off of things until the boys arrived.

Despite their agreement on dinner, Donald was entirely unsurprised when three boys burst into the houseboat barely fifteen minutes later. Huey was holding a notebook and pen, Dewey looked determined, borderline manic, and Louie's face was entirely closed off.

"Hi Unca Donald," Huey offered. Donald carefully set aside his knife, walked around the table, and scooped all three boys into a tight hug,

squeezing tighter until Dewey wheezed dramatically and Louie went boneless with a sigh.

“Hi boys,” he finally replied, “Sorry about the mess.” They remained quiet, and he withdrew.

Louie’s expression had cracked, and underneath was a desperate fear that Donald never wanted to see in his eyes again.

“You’re not gonna leave us for them, are you?” He asked, nowhere near his usual chill, his brothers gathering close either in support or in agreement, and Donald’s heart broke.

“Never,” he swore, and caught Louie as he threw himself back into Donald’s arms, shuddering. He didn’t cry, just shook, and Donald let him cling while he tried to keep himself under control.

He’d promised that he would never make his kids wonder if he would come back, he’d *promised.* Every job opportunity lost, every friendship he’d let dwindle and every adventure ignored, it had all been to make sure that he would always be there, that if they called he would come. And yet here he was, assuring them he wouldn’t leave.

The fact that he had to do so made him sick and cold.

Dewey watched them both, conflicted. Donald opened his arms a bit in invitation, but he shook his head and took a step back. Donald winced and closed his eyes to hide his expression.

Louie pulled back, eyes red but dry, and he moved away to sit at the table, moving slowly and rubbing his face as he did. Huey followed,

setting his notepad in front of him. Dewey lingered, watching Donald from the corner of his eye with suspicion.

"You lied to us," he accused, simple and angry. Huey winced, Louie rolled his eyes. Neither argued.

"I didn't lie," Donald replied, then sighed heavily. "But I didn't make an effort to tell you anything you didn't ask." He stood up, knees aching, and sat across from them.

"So, ask," he invited, and Huey spoke first, pen tapping on his paper.

"You guys dated in college?" He burst out, like the question was already on the tip of his tongue.

"Yes, starting around… our second year, I think. A few months after Daisy and I broke up for the last time."

"You *think?"* Dewey grumbled.

"Last time?" Louie asked, curious and possibly scheming.

"We were already friends, and I don't remember exactly when we crossed into dating," Donald answered first, "Daisy and I broke up a bunch of times before we called it quits. We were really bad for each other," he added with a wince. Dewey made a face at Daisy's name, while Huey wrote something down.

"And you guys broke up…?"

“When I came back to Duckburg after college; we traveled together for a while, but then Scrooge asked me to come home and they couldn’t come with me,” he explained.

“Wait…” Huey began, then trailed off, face going unhappy and pale. HIs brothers eyed him with confusion, before Louie’s face shuttered in realization.

“It was because mom was pregnant,” Louie concluded, “wasn’t it?”

Donald sighed.

“Wait, what?!” Dewey demanded, while Donald nodded once.

“Yes, your mom was pregnant when I came back. We couldn’t make long distance work at the time, and decided to just continue as friends while we were apart.” Huey looked properly distressed, and now Dewey looked conflicted, and Donald wished desperately to wipe the looks off their faces.

“You had to break up because of us?” Huey asked in a small voice. Donald shook his head vehemently and reached forward to grab his hands.

“No, we broke up because we decided to do so. I didn’t have to move back to Duckburg, and we could have tried a long-distance relationship. I could have moved to Mexico and onto Panchito’s farm. *I* made those choices, *José* and *Panchito* made those choices. It was not because of you,” he insisted, but Huey didn’t look convinced.

“Sounds like you could have moved back to them if we weren’t around,” Louie muttered. Donald shook his head.

“No, not really. Even if I hadn’t had you boys, I…” He sighed, low and sad, “I wanted to make sure I was nearby, in case Scrooge…” He shook his head.

Almost eleven years of radio silence, lingering when he had better options and desperately missed people halfway around the world, and all for a man that seemed to think nothing of him.

‘Degenerates!’

Nothing, or worse it seemed.

Huey’s small hands squeezed his, drawing Donald back to the present.

“You are never responsible for my choices,” Donald continued, and went for a smile. He got three very small ones in return. “I’m the adult, I’m the responsible one.”

He waited until they all nodded at him, then squeezed Huey’s hands and stood.

“I’m going to work on the chili,” he said, now that the tension in the room had dissipated, “you three figure out what you want to ask next.”

TMI Unca Donald!

“So who else have you dated?” Dewey asked, leaning against the wall casually; his brothers both made noises of protest at the question.

“Hey, that’s cheating, you aren’t allowed to just ask!” Huey insisted; Donald blinked, nonplussed.

“Cheating?” Three sets of eyes met his, two wide in panic and one narrowed in thought.

“That game we’re playing, remember?” Louie replied easily. “About finding all your old friends? That one.” Donald frowned, tilting his head.

“... you’re still doing that?”

“Uh, duh, we haven’t found everyone yet!” Dewey explained, like it should be obvious.

“How would you even know you found every one of my friends?” He asked, baffled; he vaguely remembered this whole thing, but he couldn’t remember what rules they’d come up with.

“We, er, never came up with a solution besides asking you,” Huey offered. “But we know we’re missing some people, and one of the rules is we can’t ask you unless we’ve already got some other proof you know them.”

“Like a photo?” Donald asked, recalling Webby coming to him with an old photo of Daisy. Huey nodded.

“Exactly!”

“Ugh, fine!” Dewey groaned, sliding down the wall a bit with a scowl. “Have you dated anyone else we already know?”

Donald considered the question, tilting his head back and forth.

“Mick and I went on one date, but that went nowhere,” he replied, tapping his fingers on his mixing spoon. “Beyond that, nobody you’ve met.”

“ *You dated Mickey Mouse?!”* Donald winced at the volume; Dewey had stood ramrod straight and was pointing dramatically at Donald, while Huey and Louie rolled their eyes.

“One date in high school Dewey, he wasn’t even famous back then,” Donald replied dismissively.

“Still!”

It seemed like Huey had been expecting something else, because he was frowning at his notebook in confusion.

“Mom thought you and Goofy had dated,” he finally said, looking back up. Donald laughed, he couldn’t help it, and shook his head.

“Goofy and Penelope were high school sweethearts, he never had eyes for anyone else,” he managed to choke out; the memory of Penny was a sobering one, but a thankfully distant pain.

“Names, Unca Donald!” Huey insisted. Donald chuckled, continuing to chop veggies while his boys had a whispered argument. He caught the words ‘points’ and ‘shared credit’ and shrugged it off entirely.

“Okay, cool, cool. And Mr. Carioca and Mr. Pistoles didn’t completely decide to move just because they wanted to date again? You guys didn’t even talk about it until Friday?”

Donald choked.

“Mr. Carioca…? Where did you even hear his last name?” He spluttered, then all but doubled over in laughter at the idea of José’s face at the title. Panchito, he would probably insist on his *full* name, and Donald laughed again at the idea.

“Tweeter,” Huey answered, which was fair enough.

“And when they talked to me about moving, Panchito didn’t say exactly what their plans were,” Donald continued. True, Panchito had said they had been apart for too long, but Donald hadn’t thought that was the entirety of it. He still wasn’t convinced that had been the case, but neither of them had said any other reasons…

“So they *could* have been moving to get back together?” Louie pressed, and Donald shrugged, feeling his face heat slightly at the idea.

“They might have,” he finally admitted, and the admission made him grin soppily into his chopping board. They probably had, they’d upturned their entire lives just to try things again-!

Huey made an aww-ing sound, while Louie rolled his eyes and Dewey gagged. Donald pointed at Dewey with a smug expression.

“You all wanted to know,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, cause you were keeping *secrets,* and you’re our *Unca Donald,* you’re the most boring family member we’ve got! That doesn’t mean it isn’t *gross!* ” Huey smacked Dewey in the arm.

“Unca Donald isn’t boring!” He snarled, face slightly flushed, and Dewey drew back in surprise. Huey took a breath; Louie patted him carefully on the shoulder.

“I didn’t mean it like a bad thing!” Dewey insisted. “Unca Donald is just- you both know, he’s our uncle! He has an office job and makes us go to bed on time!”

“So he’s being a responsible parent! That isn’t boring!” Huey responded heatedly, but less angry than before.

Donald should intervene, but he was stuck on the fact that Huey was arguing this point at all, and the shock kept him still. Since when was that *not* boring?

“I mean, it’s less exciting than Uncle Scrooge and Mom, but I don’t think that’s boring,” Louie offered, and wasn’t that weird, Louie playing the peacekeeper. Normally he was an instigator, or an amused

observer. Unless he actually agreed with Huey? Dewey looked between his brothers in surprise, then glanced at Donald like he was going to have answers.

Whatever he saw in Donald's face made him pause though, and he slumped in his seat.

"Sorry Unca Donald," he muttered, "I didn't mean to say you were boring." Donald ruffled Dewey's hair, patted Huey on the shoulder, and Louie on the cheek.

"I don't mind," he said easily, "I mean, I am kinda boring." Huey turned his irritated gaze on him.

"You are *not,"* he insisted, and scowled, crossing his arms. "You're like, the only calm thing in our lives. That's not boring! That's just, just-" but words seemed to fail him, something that rarely occurred with Huey. He gestured angrily, like he was trying to find the words he wanted in the air around him.

"Comforting?" Louie offered, and Huey pointed at him with a decisive nod.

"That! It's comforting, Unca Donald, that you're not always going on about adventures and crazy stuff. Not boring," he added, thumping his fist on the table with finality. Louie nodded sagely, and Dewey made a noise of agreement. Donald felt a fond smile spread across his face.

"Well, thank you boys. It's nice to know I'm appreciated," he said with a chuckle, and went back to making dinner.

The room fell into silence, only broken by Huey scribbling in his notebook, with occasional grunts and mumbles from his brothers. Donald turned away to cook, so missed whatever agreement they came to.

"So, when can we meet them again? Your *boyfriends,"* Dewey teased. Donald snorted, glancing at him out of the corner of his eyes.

"Soon; I have to fly out on Monday for a work assignment, but as soon as I'm back we'll plan something, alright?" He explained. "They're both excited to get a chance to chat without being threatened by a giant plant monster."

"Aw, that's half the fun!" Dewey insisted, while Louie said at the same time, "Way to jinx us Unca Donald."

"José said something similar," Donald said to Louie with a grin, and Louie perked up a bit.

"Really? Huh," he replied thoughtfully. He didn't elaborate on what he was thinking, so Donald went back to cooking, letting himself zone out as he chopped and seasoned. Huey scribbled away, though what he was still writing was a mystery; he'd taken to coding everything he wrote after completing a Cryptography badge, and the few glimpses Donald had caught weren't enough to let him translate.

"Hey, Unca Donald? Why didn't you tell anyone about you dating before? I mean, mom said she had no idea you dated anyone except Daisy," Dewey asked hesitantly. Donald paused, glancing at the three boys with a pensive frown.

"I was worried how everyone would react, I think," he finally replied. "Not because anyone had said anything, just… Well. Nerves, I

suppose. And then I kept pushing it off until, well, there was nobody to tell." They winced as one at the vague reference; there was only one moment he could be talking about, really, and nobody in the family liked to talk about the Spear of Selene.

"Yeah, uh, fair warning, but Uncle Scrooge was yelling up a storm when we found out," Louie said. He held his phone in one hand, half-hiding his face in it, but his eyes were watching the room attentively.

"We could hear him all over the Manor!" Dewey added.

"Not that we could hear what he was saying, that wasn't very clear?" Louie offered, angling his head to see Donald's face. Donald was frozen staring at the chili pot.

His *boys* had heard that?

"Don't worry," he choked out, hoping his voice would cover for it. "I got the gist of it from his voicemail. It was nothing to worry about."

"He said *that* to-" Huey started, eyes wide and staring before he closed his beak with a clack.

"Said what?" Dewey's eyes darted back and forth between them all. "Huey?"

"Nothing worth repeating," Donald declared, a bit sharply, before he consciously softened his stance to rub Huey's shoulder. Huey looked back at him with eyes still wide and wet.

“But-” He began to protest, then went silent. Dewey looked baffled, Louie concerned.

“He shouldn’t talk about you like that,” Huey finally said, “He shouldn’t have said any of it.” He looked frustrated, and his cheeks were flushed.

It was easy to forget, at times, that Huey had a black temper, same as Donald, same as Hortense. Huey usually had a good leash on it, could better control his rage and direct it when he couldn’t keep it in check. But right now, Donald could tell he was struggling, and with no easy target around it would be harder to contain.

“But what did he say?” Dewey demanded, twisting in his seat, unable to see Huey’s face clearly, while Louie gestured for him to back down harshly. Dewey waved him off. “It couldn’t have been that bad…”

And here he hesitated, finally spotting Huey’s reddening face and wild eyes, hands gripped around the tabletop while Donald kept a hand on his shoulder to ground him, Louie looking trapped and anxious.

“It wasn’t that awful, was it?” He asked again, meekly, and Donald hated this, hated that Scrooge had managed to drag his boys into their issues.

“To be honest, he was grumbling so much I couldn’t tell what he said,” Donald told him, and Huey shuddered under his hands. “Hue, do you need a break? Something to hit, or scream into?” He continued, and Huey shook his head. One hand left the table to grab at Donald’s, squeezing tight enough to make his fingers ache.

“He shouldn’t have said it,” Huey growled, teeth gritted. Louie winced, scooted away a bit.

“Listen boys, Scrooge… sometimes he says things he doesn’t mean, when he’s shocked or angry. I know not to take him too seriously,” Donald said carefully, but Huey outright glared at him at that line.

“You would break his beak if he *ever* talked to us like that!” He insisted, and, well.

Donald felt red-hot rage pour into his bones at the *idea* of it, and had to concede the point.

“He talks to you like that a lot too, it wasn’t just yesterday! What about when you moved down here?” Huey continued, hand clenched around Donald’s, eyes boring into his.

“I mean, Huey’s got a point,” Louie agreed quietly, “He even called you names during game night, and that was after you and he had been kicking our butts all night. So he wasn’t even being competitive.”

“And he and mom both were calling you a downer when we went on that adventure for that boring future scroll,” Dewey added, looking conflicted. “He even tossed you back to that toad demon thing after rescuing Uncle Gladstone. Didn’t even look worried, just joked that your luck was too bad to taste good.”

Donald looked between the three of them, feeling distinctly off-kilter. It wasn’t like he hadn’t thought of it before, it wasn’t even the first time someone had pointed it out to him. But his boys, he hadn’t realized how much they had noticed.

He felt… ashamed, somehow. LIke he should have dealt with it before the kids had noticed their dynamic.

Or like the situation was his fault, somehow. It usually was.

And now, he had no idea how to deal with it. If he defended Scrooge, was that saying that Scrooge's attitude was acceptable? That they should allow it because Scrooge rarely meant what he said, or that from people that loved you, it was okay?

But on the other hand, the idea of fighting against Scrooge every single time he insulted him was exhausting, and doomed to fail. He'd done that as a teenager, every insult and passive remark getting called out, and had been called difficult and ornery for his efforts. All of his complaints and concerns blamed on his temper, his bad luck, his cowardice. Eventually, he'd given up, tried to let things roll off his back when he could, and refused to participate when he couldn't.

He had missed a lot of adventures that way. While Della and Scrooge grew closer, Donald had only grown apart, towards Uno and the Navy and the Cabs. It had been… easier, dealing with new people. He could form friendships without his family's interference. Found companionship with people that didn't poke his temper on purpose unless necessary, didn't mind his hesitation with certain adventures (even listened to him about his concerns!). Didn't blame him for every mishap.

But then Della was pregnant. She and Scrooge wanted to go on one last adventure, explore space with the new babies. Donald had come back, wary and excited, and for a short time all had seemed well. Scrooge wasn't so abrasive, Della wasn't so foolhardy, Donald could handle their jibes and jokes with hard-won confidence instead of rage. Things had been smooth sailing for the first time in a long time, and he'd been hopeful.

Then Della wanted to go up before the eggs hatched; she didn't want to wait until they were old enough to appreciate it. Scrooge had built

the rocket in secret instead of listening to Donald's concerns or even talking about them; Downer Donald as usual, unable to stop worrying long enough to enjoy the new adventure. And everything had fallen apart at the seams.

He'd been silent for too long; Huey was peering up at him, anger faded to concern, and Dewey and Louie pressed in at their brother's side to move in close. Donald sighed.

"You're right, I would never let him talk to you like that," he admitted, letting his shoulders drop. "And I shouldn't let him say it to me. I'm used to him is all, and the best way to handle it, for me at least, has been to ignore him."

"That's what school tells us about bullies," Huey pointed out with a frown. "Because they're looking for a reaction." Donald shrugged a shoulder, unable to deny it. Though he'd found that fighting back worked better for most bullies; they wanted a reaction, sure, but not a broken nose.

Scrooge, on the other hand… he seemed to relish the challenge.

"Sometimes it's easier to not get angry about it," he said, with a humorless laugh. "Arguing with your uncle is like fighting a brick wall. No matter what, the wall wins and you're just tired, and probably embarrassed."

"But that's not fair!" Dewey cried out, both fists clenched. "You shouldn't have to do it at all! Scrooge is family, you shouldn't have to think of him like an enemy to fight!"

"I don't think of him as an enemy," Donald assured him, "It's just… a part of him I don't like, and try to avoid when I can."

None of his boys looked convinced. Louie actually looked like he was plotting something, and Huey looked righteously angry. Dewey was clearly still bothered and trying not to show it. Donald tugged the three of them into an awkward hug, since he was still leaning over the table.

“I don’t care what Scrooge thinks of me,” he said quietly, as earnestly as he could. “I’ve got the three most important opinions right here.”

“More than your boyfriends?” Louie asked, not even pretending to squirm in his embrace, and he squeezed them all a bit tighter. He could feel small hands clutch at the back of his shirt.

“Of course. You all come first.”

Donald released them, and when he confirmed they all looked calm and content instead of worried, he went back to cooking.

“Okay, I’ve been wanting to ask this for days, but since when do you wear anything but sailor suits!” Dewey shouted not three minutes later, and Donald splattered the ceiling with chili.

“Dewey!”

“What! We’ve all been thinking it! You just told us you had a million of them, and then you’re wearing nice shirts all the time?!”

Ah, back to normal.

It had been a while since they'd eaten just the four of them; Webby was a standard addition now, Bentina and Launchpad joined them often enough that Donald usually made enough for both, just in case. Della joined if she was around, but with her sleep schedule being a mess she wasn't always awake. Even so, Donald hated for people to go hungry from his table.

Unfortunately, he was now in the habit of making enough food to feed an army, and he was about to leave the country for who-knew how long. Donald pursed his beak, staring at the piles of tupperware with annoyance. Nothing for it, he'd have to bring them somewhere, and the most obvious place was…

"I'll have to drop these off with you boys off at the Manor later, or they'll all go bad," he decided, and if they boys looked concerned, he didn't look. He couldn't avoid the Manor forever anyway, he had family there. Scrooge would just have to deal with one of those *degenerates* being around.

He opted to drive; seemed silly, sure, but he didn't want anyone dropping perfectly good food on the ground.

"Thanks for driving us up, Unca Donald!" Huey said earnestly when they pulled into the driveway. The boys, even Louie, insisted on taking the leftovers inside themselves, no matter that Donald was just heading back down the hill to bed and was in no rush. He huffed, but found a smile cross his face anyway. They were probably just trying to hide the leftover chili so they could eat it themselves, but he felt unbearably fond at that moment as he turned the car to go back home.

As he pulled around, Scrooge walked out of the garage, feathers ruffled and clutching something that had likely been in storage, wrapped in burlap. For a moment, their eyes met through the windshield. Scrooge looked startled, then irritated; Donald's face was slack with surprise.

He grit his teeth, forced a slow breath through his nose that hissed its way out, and waited. Scrooge was in his way to leave, and tempting though it was to pull forward and make him move in an unfair game of chicken, he didn't.

He was *hurt* and he was *angry,* so enraged that if he weren't in his car he would probably have already punched his uncle for what he'd said about José and Panchito (and Donald himself, at least implicitly). But.

But. If Donald did break his uncle's beak, the other duck would insist he had misunderstood or was too unreasonable to speak to and clearly overreacting. And he just- he had the Blot to deal with, and FOWL was growing, and fuck everything, he just didn't *care* . Apathy was less work.

So he waited, fingers tapping on the steering wheel, as Scrooge stared at him, also clearly waiting. For what? For Donald to get out and yell?

Finally Scrooge stomped forward, face determined and scowl set in, but to better approach Donald's door he had to veer off the driveway, and Donald took the opportunity to leave. He didn't bother looking up at Scrooge as he passed, except to check that he wasn't about to run him over, but he could feel his burning glare anyway. Scrooge shouted something at his rear window, probably an insult, but Donald didn't hear the words, and he didn't want to.

He drove home. The kitchen was still warm, dishes already washed

and dried. His bags were already packed and ready to go, and since he never slept well in the air, he planned to go to bed early to prepare. Tomorrow the Blot/FOWL investigation began, and he needed all the energy he could get.

Tonight, though, he found three ruffled ducklings curled up on the couch stubbornly, staring at him with big eyes.

They would have had to run to arrive before he did.

“We wanna stay here tonight, so we can see you off!” Dewey exclaimed, taking the lead. Donald put his hands on his hips, aiming for a stern look and utterly failing judging by the looks he got in return.

“Did you let someone know you were staying here?” He asked.

“Besides you?” Louie asked innocently, eyes widening further. Donald rolled his, snorting a laugh.

“Yes, besides me. I don’t want to panic your mother, or Bentina,” he added, and the boys shuddered.

“We told Mrs. B before we left,” Huey replied, and Donald let his hands fall with a nod.

“Good. Can’t panic the ex-spy, can you imagine?” He said as he flopped onto the couch with a groan.

“Ugh, she’d be tracking our phones and setting loose the dogs like, immediately,” Louie groaned. Donald felt an eyebrow rise.

“Dogs?”

Louie waved a hand at him; it nearly smacked Huey in the face.

“Metaphorically. Probably; wait, do we have dogs?”

Donald let his head fall to the back of the couch, letting the debate wash over him without really listening to it. He had to get up and go to his actual bed (well, hammock) or he’d be sore in the morning.

Just. In a minute.

One more minute.

One more…

Interlude: Huey is FED UP

Huey knew, had always known, that his temper was dangerous. Even without his uncle as an example, the level of destruction that came with losing his temper was more than enough to make him wary.

Which meant that he had to remain calm, no matter how much he wanted to *break every single thing in Scrooge's office.* Including Uncle Scrooge, who was doing paperwork as loudly as he could, making sure everyone in the Manor knew he was in one of his moods.

Join the club, Huey thought to himself. Unlike him, though, Uncle Scrooge had no reason to be anything. No good reason, anyway.

They'd only just been dropped off at the Manor, it had seemed, when they all heard Uncle Scrooge yelling at Unca Donald in the driveway, telling him to 'Come back here and explain yourself!'

Louie had groaned even as they all ran outside, to see Uncle Scrooge shouting at the already closed gate, Unca Donald clearly already long gone.

The goal had been to keep the two apart, until things could calm down; at least, that's how Dewey had put it. Huey personally didn't think anything would calm down. Nothing *should* calm down.

Unca Donald's face haunted him; confused and conflicted and lost when Huey had pointed out that Uncle Scrooge was being- had said-

He didn't want to think about it. Didn't want to think about how Unca Donald had been confused by Huey *defending* him. Didn't want to have

heard what Uncle Scrooge had said to Unca Donald, to be the *only* one that had heard. It wasn't fair, he wanted to scream, that he knew any of it. Ignorance was bliss, and he didn't think he would feel bliss ever again.

Except, of course, him knowing wasn't the issue. He wanted to go back to when he hadn't noticed how mean Uncle Scrooge was to Unca Donald, but that wouldn't really fix the problem, would it? It would still be happening, he would just be… blissfully unaware.

Uncle Donald had left early, a travel bag in his trunk, apologizing that he didn't have time to make breakfast. He'd fallen asleep with them on the couch, not even in bed, and it had been hard work to move him to a somewhat comfortable position. It was familiar, routine even, and Huey had had coffee made by the time Unca Donald had been dressed, tugging a tie over his collar with a scowl.

He'd kissed each of them on the forehead, promised he would text when he landed, and then he was gone. And that part was new. The leaving. He wouldn't be back for dinner, wouldn't be lecturing them on doing homework and brushing their teeth. Sure, they were all gone a lot, but Unca Donald being gone as well was different. Not a bad different, he wanted to insist, even to himself. Just a break from routine.

Now Huey was sat in their shared room at the Manor, because Dewey had flight lessons with mom and Louie had some vague plans that were either a scheme or a ploy to watch more TV, and both things required them to be at the Manor.

Huey didn't want to be here. He didn't want to talk to Uncle Scrooge, he didn't want to talk to anyone at all, but the longer he stayed in the Manor, the more likely someone would come around and try. But to leave he would *have* to talk to someone, so he was stuck staring at the wall of his room and wishing he could smash holes into the plaster until it was as crumbled as his mind was.

“Huey?”

Webby stood in the doorway, a curious look on her face. Huey felt annoyance and desperation both, hoping for a distraction and terrified he’d snap at his pseudo-sister instead.

“Hey Webby,” Huey replied, the words grating in his throat, when Webby didn’t speak, and gestured vaguely at the room to invite her in. She came in slowly, cautiously, and sat on the floor across from him.

“How’d it go? Everything good now?” She asked, and Huey blinked. What could be good?

Oh right, dinner with Unca Donald.

“Yeah, we’re good. Unca Donald said he’d try to have dinner or something with all of us later.” Huey paused, something occurring to him. “Sorry we didn’t invite you, it was just-” Webby waved him off before he could finish.

“Nah, no worries, I get it. We’re family, but he raised you guys, it’s a bit different,” she said casually, no signs of feeling rejected.

“You could probably come to dinner with us though,” he said, and she grinned at him, eager.

“That would be cool! Do you think José could teach me Portuguese?” Huey shrugged, already done with this conversation but unwilling to do anything to chase Webby away. His temper frayed further.

“Probably? He seemed nice,” Huey offered. He gripped his knees tighter.

Unca Donald had said he could have moved in with Panchito in Mexico. He stayed because of Uncle *Scrooge*.

“Yeah, I mean, I doubt that Uncle Donald would date somebody that was mean,” Webby mused, tilting her head back to look at the ceiling.

“Probably not,” Huey agreed absently. He wanted out of this room. He wanted out of this Manor.

He wanted Unca Donald.

A hand gently grabbed his shoulder. Huey hissed, brushed it off harshly. Webby flinched back, eyes wide.

“Sorry, I just- I-” Huey stuttered, then let out an unintelligible squawk of rage and slammed a clenched fist into the wall behind him.

“Um, would it help if I distract you? Or if I get Louie?” Webby offered, shifting away. Huey shook his head.

“I want to hit something,” he grumbled, and he hated it, hated that he couldn’t stay under control.

“Oh! Want to go to the gym? We could spar, or…” Huey shook his head, so she changed tacts, “... there’s a punching bag?”

Huey considered, nodded. Webby gently took his hands and tugged him down the hallway. Her touch made his skin itch, the lights in the hallway grated, the distant sound of water flowing in the plumbing and the buzz of the lights all but demanded he start breaking walls to stop all the *noise* .

Webby wrapped his hands, and Huey let go of his shredding control with a snarl and dove at the nearest punching bag.

Unca Donald had told him that when he couldn’t calm himself down, the best thing to do was find an outlet that was safe and burn off his rage until he could focus on fixing the problem. It was hard to focus on fixing anything when you were so angry that the world went red and all he could do was scream.

So he screamed, and his fists flew, until color faded back in and he was panting, aching, shaking, in front of the heavy bag.

The last time he’d gotten this mad, he’d trashed their whole room, back on the houseboat. Feathers everywhere, broken toys, everything was destroyed. Unca Donald had come in, sighed, and guided him to sit and breathe. Had bandaged his hands, talked through what had made him so *angry* (and Huey couldn’t even *remember* anymore, it had seemed so unimportant as soon as the fit ended).

Then he’d gotten up, to tidy up, because Dewey and Louie didn’t have anywhere to sleep. Huey didn’t. And Huey had felt his anger melt into shame. Unca Donald hadn’t done anything, but the mess was there, and someone needed to deal with it.

Huey had insisted on cleaning everything up. He'd sewed the pillows up and glued broken bits of wood and plastic back together, while Unca Donald helped, talking quietly about the things he'd done when he lost his temper. The destruction, the screaming.

"The key is," Unca Donald had said carefully, sweeping up the last splinters, "if you're going to lose control, try to only break *things*. You'll have a mess to clean up later, but that's better. Never hurt people, unless you're in danger. Things can be replaced, people can't."

Huey had wondered, at the time, if Unca Donald had ever hurt someone in his anger that he hadn't meant to. Usually when Unca Donald got mad, he only hurt *himself*. He'd never broken one of the boys' things, not even when he tripped and broke a whole stack of plates because Dewey had left his train in the hallway. Huey wondered, if whenever Unca Donald got that black rage and started to scream, if he was scared that this time, he would hurt *them*.

Webby stood to the side as he caught his breath, a first aid case in her hands. Huey let out a shuddering sigh and let her check his hands over.

"I don't think I've ever seen you lose your temper like that," she offered quietly, "You looked like Unca Donald last time we fought the Beagle Boys."

Huey shrugged, as much as he was able.

"I don't like it. Being so out of control. I try not to let it happen."

Webby frowned.

“What do you mean by let? You can’t really plan out being angry at something.”

“But I can plan how I deal with it! If I have a plan, I don’t get mad, cause then I can solve it,” Huey explained earnestly, clenching his hands as Webby removed the wrappings. They ached, but there was no skin damage.

“So, you’re mad right now cause of something you can’t plan around?” Webby asked with interest; her expression said she’d come to some other conclusion, but for once Huey didn’t feel like pursuing it, and he just nodded, feeling tired and wrung out now that the adrenaline was fading.

“Want to talk about it?” She asked, tentative. Huey’s hands were free now, so they were both just sitting on the gym floor, looking at the ground between them.

“Kinda? But I don’t- I don’t know how to fix it!” He admitted in a shout, then slumped back down, arms crossed.

“Well, maybe I can help? Two minds are better than one!”

“But it’s not- it’s about Unca Donald and Uncle Scrooge. And Unca Donald doesn’t *want* to do anything about it for some reason, and it makes me so *mad!”*

Webby’s face fell, hands dropping into her lap.

“He’s still mad about Uncle Donald’s new boyfriends?” She asked, and Huey shook his head vehemently. He jumped to his feet to pace,

already regretting taking the wrappings off his hands. His arms ached, but his skin was buzzing with too much energy all over again.

"You should have heard what he *said!* And apparently he sent that message to Unca Donald! And he just- he just accepted it! It was awful Webby, he just said that Uncle Scrooge says stuff he doesn't mean sometimes," and here Webby winced, and Huey regretted his words but couldn't seem to stop them, "but that doesn't make it okay! He would *never* let him say anything like that to us, but he didn't do anything about Uncle Scrooge…"

"What did he say?" A new voice interrupted, and Huey's eyes snapped to the doorway.

Mrs B, armed with water bottles and a towel, walked towards them briskly. Everything she did was brisk; she was always certain and confident in her movements, no matter if they were cleaning, cooking or tossing some new attacker out the window.

Huey hesitated, and his eyes went to Webby. Webby, who loved Uncle Scrooge; he was her *hero.* Who didn't deserve to feel like Huey did right now. Because under the anger and discomfort, Huey was hurt and disappointed and so so scared.

He loved Uncle Scrooge. He loved Unca Donald. How could he love them both?

"I don't want to talk about it," he muttered. Webby looked at her granny, desperation clear in her eyes, and Mrs. B sighed.

"Webby dear, would you let Huey and I talk for a moment?" She asked, taking a seat on the floor next to them. Webby's eyes went wide, and her beak wobbled, and Huey wanted to say something but

couldn't unstick his beak until Webby nodded, patted Huey on the shoulder once, and left the room. Huey flopped back to the floor.

"Now then," Mrs. B said, "can you tell me what he said?"

"I- he said…" he started, and felt his throat close. It was stupid, Uncle Scrooge hadn't said anything to *him,* but he wanted to cry anyway.

Mrs. B waited across from him, handing him a water bottle and saying nothing as he sniffled and forced himself under control.

"Uncle Scrooge called Mr. José and Mr. Panchito degenerates, and lazy, good-for-nothing, wastes of space, and he said that Unca Donald was- was pathetic for even liking them and he said they weren't ever allowed to come to the Manor and *he even said that Unca Donald was stupid and shouldn't trust them at all and- "* He stopped, gasping, and gulped down his water. Mrs. B waited.

"And I thought at first he was just complaining to himself, getting it out of his system before Unca Donald came home, but Unca Donald said that Uncle Scrooge left him a voicemail saying all that stuff. He said he didn't hear most of it, but…" Huey shrugged.

Mrs. B was quiet, but she didn't look like she was waiting for Huey to say more. She just looked contemplative.

"Your great uncle has a bad habit of saying truly horrendous things when angered, things he regrets when he calms down," she finally said, and Huey exploded into motion again, shooting up and pacing because the alternative was screaming and punching things again.

“So what, he just gets to say whatever he wants because he’s angry?!” He demanded, but he wasn’t asking her, not really. “Unca Donald said the same thing, but he wouldn’t ever let Uncle Scrooge say stuff like that to anyone else! And it’s not like he ever apologizes for it either! He just says awful things like calling Unca Donald lazy or saying Webby isn’t family and never does a thing about it!”

“He did apologize to Webby.”

“But not to Unca Donald! Or Launchpad when he almost replaced him with a robot driver! Cause he knows Launchpad won’t hold it against him for long, and Unca Donald doesn’t even- he just said that he tries to ignore him, and he looked so tired…” Huey scowled at the memory; Unca Donald had said he was used to it, used to his family spitting venom and having to either ignore it or exhaust himself fighting.

No wonder Unca Donald had such a bad temper.

“I didn’t mean to say he should be allowed to speak to you, or your uncle, in such a way. Only that he likely doesn’t truly feel so negatively towards Donald’s new partners, and that once he has calmed down they can have a proper conversation,” Mrs. B explained, face unreadable.

“They won’t. Unca Donald said he doesn't care what Uncle Scrooge thinks about him, and Uncle Scrooge is *never* the person to reach out first,” Huey grumbled. “And it shouldn’t be up to Unca Donald to wait until Uncle Scrooge calms down when he’s the one that got screamed at.”

Mrs. Beakley’s face was still mildly blank, and that made him angry, but so did everything else around him right now.

“I’m afraid that how they choose to handle things is between your uncles. I understand your anger with Scrooge, but I have to recommend staying out of it,” she said, and Huey rolled his eyes.

“Like you did when we were mad about the Spear of Selene?” He snarked, and was rewarded by a split-second moment of surprise. “You knew he would never show up to talk to us and stepped in cause you wanted to fix it without waiting another decade.”

She looked less calm now, more troubled, and her brows drew down.

“Everyone always works around Uncle Scrooge cause we know that he’s never gonna move,” Huey said, half in realization himself.

How often did they all make excuses for Uncle Scrooge anyway?

Mrs. B gave him a long look, thoughtful.

“Then perhaps we should stop moving around him, and start insisting that he move instead,” she offered, and heaved herself to her feet. “I think we need some tea and biscuits, and then we will need your brother.” So saying, she made her way out of the room.

“Wait, what? What do you mean? And why Louie?” Huey called, trailing after her. Somehow, he didn’t think she meant Dewey, but she didn’t stop to explain.

Webby, waiting in the hallway, looked so downtrodden and sad that Huey could tell immediately that she had been eavesdropping. He slowed down enough to take her hand so they were both following Mrs. B towards the kitchen.

“I’m sorry, for making you leave,” Huey said quietly as they walked/jogged down the hall, “I didn’t think you’d want to hear that.”

Nothing worth repeating, Unca Donald had said. Huey didn’t want to ignore the problem, but maybe his uncle had a point.

“No, I- I should have left instead of listening in,” Webby replied, eyes on the floor. “Sorry for eavesdropping. And I get it, you were trying to do something nice.”

They didn’t speak again as they reached the kitchen, where Mrs. B was already starting a kettle for tea and pulling out cookies from a jar. She paused by the pantry, looking at the door with a contemplative expression, before she moved along.

“Now, let’s have a snack and some tea, and we can talk about this as a family,” she said as she set out cups and a tray of cookies. Huey sat down at the kitchen table, dragging Webby with him.

It was quite possibly the most awkward afternoon tea Huey had ever had, silent as Mrs. B evaluated them both with sharp eyes and Webby stared into her teacup like it held answers at the bottom.

Louie wandered in, as though drawn in by the premise of food, but he hesitated at the door.

“Uh, I can come back later?”

“No, as it happens I believe your siblings need your insight,” Mrs. B

said, and then she stood. “Mine, however, is needed elsewhere. I will be back in a moment.” And with that, she left, with Huey staring after her.

“So… what’s going on?”

“Huey told her what Uncle Scrooge said on the phone,” Webby said quietly, still gazing into her cup. Louie squinted at her, then at Huey, before taking a seat and nabbing a cookie.

“The call you wouldn’t tell us about?” He clarified, and Huey nodded, slumping forward.

“Guess it was pretty bad,” Louie said in a leading tone.

“He called them all lazy, useless degenerates and said Mr. José and Mr. Panchito aren’t allowed at the Manor, and… you get the gist of it,” Huey explained shortly, tired of repeating it. Louie blinked at him, then at Webby’s forlorn face, and silently pushed the cookie plate closer.

“So he’s old and homophobic? Gotta say, I didn’t expect that,” Louie offered. Huey snorted a surprised laugh.

“Yeah, he’s usually so progressive,” he replied. It wasn’t a good joke. It was barely a joke at all, really, but Louie laughed anyway, and Webby let out a weak, watery giggle. It made him feel a bit better.

“So what are you two so worried about? He’s old, not dead, we can make him change,” Louie said in a clear tone. It was the voice he used to sell them on a new scheme. Despite himself, Huey looked up with

interest. Louie sounded confident, and his plans *usually* worked, right?

Webby perked up a bit as well.

“Make him change? How?” She asked, hopeful and doubtful at once. Louie grinned at them both, and spread his hands like a magician about to reveal a trick.

“Let me explain,” he started, and they all leaned in as one.

Dead Ends and new Leads

Donald slept fitfully on the plane, badly enough that 330 commented on it, and had to resort to a healing spell just to remain functional as they made their way to their hotel. Thankfully he got more sleep that night, but had issues falling to sleep after receiving a cryptic message from Bentina.

Bentina: The children appear to be plotting. As their plot is not currently dangerous or destructive I do not plan on intervening, but I assumed you would appreciate forewarning

Donald: ???

He'd texted the kids, not wanting to call due to time differences, but they had only said they were hanging out together, and could he confirm the name of the ship he'd served on in the Navy? So that was a bust. As a last resort he'd reached out to Della, just before falling asleep, and woke up to even more confusion.

Della: i havent noticed any plotting??? Lemme check

Della: oh

And then nothing for several hours, during which Donald and 330 suited up and went out on mission, so he wasn't able to check back in. 330 seemed curious, but didn't ask, which Donald heavily appreciated.

The base they were checking was notable only because of how close it was to the villa that had hosted the auction; otherwise it had only

been used as a storage location for FOWL. Donald figured it was somewhere that would be easy to get back up and running as a base without gathering too much attention, if FOWL had been inclined to do so.

"It is a long shot," he admitted as they drove towards the base, hidden out in the woods. The entrance itself was a large metal door set into a small hill; it looked more like an emergency bunker than anything more nefarious, and even when it had been in use the metal had been allowed to rust and decay to further disguise it.

"We've got people looking at the more likely solutions, and nobody has found anything," 330 pointed out, tapping his fingers on the dashboard. "Maybe a long shot will get us more information." Donald chuckled, and then they had arrived.

Well, more accurately, they arrived at a safe place to leave the car without being suspicious; there was still a hike through the woods to get to the entrance. Just because they had deemed this an unlikely FOWL base didn't mean they were going to walk right up to the front door, guns blazing.

It did mean a long walk through the woods in infiltration gear, and it meant they couldn't talk once they left the car, in case there were cameras or FOWL agents patrolling. 330 had a scanner on his wrist, checking for body heat or electronic signals; Donald just had his eyes, darting along trees and shadows as they walked. It was late morning, and without the tension it would be a nice walk. Birds chirping, squirrels chattering, a distant metal clang-

What?

Donald's head snapped towards the noise, stopping so abruptly 330 almost crashed into him. Donald crouched down and approached the

noise, hoping for an eye-line, but it had clearly been a great distance away, and there was nothing but trees to see.

330 tapped his shoulder, holding his scanner so Donald could see it. On the very edge of the range was a bright spot of heat on the thermal scanner, more than what a group of people hiking would account for. 330 glanced at him, and Donald nodded; the original entrance would still be there later. They changed direction.

This new goal was closer, but the terrain was rougher, and took more time to cover; Donald nearly twisted an ankle over a tree root so many times he honestly wondered if Gladstone needed him to do something later and it was second-hand luck saving his leg.

As they walked, Donald's mind wandered to the various possibilities. FOWL, or someone aware of their abandoned base at least, made the most sense. Simplest answer. But he couldn't rule out a coincidence, or something benign. Some construction they hadn't been aware of, possibly?

But they could hear mechanical clanking and grinding long before they reached the clearing, which didn't seem likely in the middle of nowhere; there wasn't exactly a bustling city that could be expanding. Donald slowed them both to a crawl as they approached. If Donald had his way they would climb up to the treetops, but the trees here were scarce and spindly, far too small to support the weight of one adult, let alone two. So they had to stay low and depend on the brush to hide them.

Beyond the last few trees was a large pile of rocks and rubble, which looked recently disturbed. Donald peered around it, wary of climbing over, and saw that just beyond the pile was a metal door set into the rocky hillside, exactly like the one they had been looking for. He paused, momentarily considering that they might have been wrong about the coordinates. Could he have been leading them in the wrong direction? But no, they were over a mile away from that door. This

one wasn't on their records. And judging by the rocks he was leaning against, it was new.

He leaned out further, since the noise he'd heard as they had approached hadn't stopped. There was nothing by the door itself, but across the clearing, as he moved closer, was a small parking lot's worth of trucks, being loaded by a number of milling people. None were wearing the standard Egghead helmets, but the FOWL logo was printed on the sides of the trucks, though they were faded and worn. Salvaged vehicles, maybe?

330 tapped on his shoulder; this time he was holding up a small tracker. Donald eyed it, then the trucks, which seemed ready to move out at any point. Risk getting caught, or risk losing valuable information?

Information won out. He nodded, and 330 passed him a few more, and they broke apart. Donald went the route that crossed by the steel door, opting to climb on the hill behind the entrance. Each step risked being seen, and there wasn't much plausible reason for him to be here, so he moved fast and low to the ground.

There were still no cameras or tracking devices that he could see, but this looked like FOWL was moving out, not staying. Unless this *wasn't* FOWL, just some opportunistic people looting the former base, but that wouldn't explain the new entrance. And SHUSH hadn't left much worth salvaging here, based on 22's reports. She'd been on a mission to burn everything that FOWL had ever created, and at the time it had looked like she had succeeded.

Descending the hill, he was close enough to hear the possible FOWL agents, and certainly close enough for them to see him if they looked over. The sound of the truck engines was loud enough to cover some incidental noises, which helped a touch, but not enough to make this a calm job.

The first truck he reached was parked close to the brush-line, awkwardly angled. He dropped to an army crawl, sliding under the nearest bush. The twigs and rocks scraped his arms as he moved, embedding themselves underneath his feathers. Just above him, the running board on the truck came into reach, coated in mud and incidental leaves. Donald reached up, cautiously, and stuck the tracker in the inner lip of the running board before he withdrew.

There really wasn't a safe distance he could retreat to; he paused in the thick of the bush and listened. The people chatted about how many containers were left, what time they needed to be finished by, but nothing that indicated they had seen him or 330. There wasn't much reason for them to act, 330 and he were more than surrounded and outnumbered, so their lack of alarm was a good sign.

The next three trucks were too far away for him to reach without being in the open for far too long, but the one after that had a trailer that had been backed right over a thick spray of branches, so he made his way there, wincing with each movement.

The trailer had a crack in a taillight that he squeezed a tracker into, then another into one of the large metal containers stacked on it. He had to force it into a small gap where the bottom of the container had broken away from the wall of it, close enough that he worried for a moment if he would be able to make it fit. Then he moved along the line, slow and dragging, wincing at the thought of picking dirt and twigs out of his feathers later.

In an ideal world, they would have time to place trackers on the vehicles and containers with more planning, maybe listen in enough to narrow down where each was going. But they had neither the time, resources or ability to do so, so this would have to do. As it stood he hadn't been able to consider exactly what they would be tracking anyway; weapons? Technology? Money or valuables? The possibilities were endless, and the nondescript metal crates and barrels didn't make things any clearer.

He was hoping and praying they weren't more power cells. Surely they would be treating them with more caution if they were? Unless they didn't know…

Well, if he and 330 were in the blast zone, they wouldn't be able to get away fast enough, so there was nothing he could do right now.

He couldn't see 330, which was good, but as they hadn't been able to confirm a place to meet when they were done, Donald found himself anxious anyway, ears pricked for any change in the chatter above him. The guards and workers seemed oblivious thus far, casually loading the crates and barrels while talking about a recent football match.

It was one of the funny things that Donald never quite got over during infiltration missions, how calm the workers were. To them this was just a job, nothing more. You would never know they were committing a crime. It was a fascinating thing to observe, when he had the time to consider it. Right now, as he was pinned to the ground listening, he was only trying to remember the scores for the last game to confirm if they were making things up as some kind of cover.

He inched along the brush to another vehicle, but there wasn't another within easy reach. The more vehicles they tagged, the better, but if they got caught then they would all be useless. He stopped underneath a thicket of branches, the best cover he could find in the moment, and considered the remaining vehicles he could see. He didn't know which ones 330 had already tagged, and it seemed foolish to get caught by double working something. Some was better than dead.

The metal doors clanged shut with an echoing bang that shook the ground, and the chatter was abruptly cut off.

“Alright everyone, roll out time!” A cheerful female voice called out; Donald was too low to even have a prayer of seeing her. “You have your coordinates and routes, check-in is in two hours!”

What followed was a flurry of movement, hurried and yet coordinated. He was reminded of an anthill, based on what he could see. Trucks were starting and moving out *fast,* a coordinated convoy of trucks and trailers that had every chance of containing FOWL weaponry, or unstable power cells, or maybe more smuggled artifacts. They wouldn’t know until they were able to follow the trackers, and the longer they took to follow them the more likely they wouldn’t be able to actually use the data, or the trackers would be lost, or any number of other issues.

They really should have a team working on this, but of course they had no reason to expect anything to be here; this was a long shot!

Donald reminded himself that they didn’t know this was FOWL, but as the trucks continued to drive off, clearly organized and well staffed, he didn’t think that the alternatives were much better. Best case scenario was they had another organization running around using old FOWL bases for their own needs, and that just meant there was a new enemy that they knew even *less* about.

A boot crunched in the gravel next to his ear.

Donald froze, not daring to breathe, only letting his eyes dart to the side for a desperate glimpse, but he couldn’t see anything. He couldn’t hear anything over the engines around them.

The gravel crunched again, like the person above him had shifted to look around. Donald couldn’t be more still.

If he'd been spotted, he might be about to get a bullet to the back of the head. If, by some miracle, he *hadn't* been, the slightest movement could change that in a heartbeat. His pulse thumped in his ears.

Thump. A leaf rustled above him; was it muffling the sound of a gun cocking?

Thump. The boot didn't move.

Thump. Was 330 in a safer location?

Thu- BANG

Donald flinched, but it wasn't a gun; it was an engine backfiring. The boot by him ground into the dirt and turned back towards the remaining vehicles, but didn't leave. Donald took a risk to turn his head, just a touch, so he could see the toe. It was a combat boot, scuffed and dirty, untied. Donald couldn't see the other foot.

"Oi, Joe! Text on your own time, we gotta get moving!" A voice called out, and the person above Donald grumbled and walked away.

"I'm trying to get music for the drive! Your playlist sucks!" They shouted back, and now Donald could see the dog was holding a phone and wearing headphones. If they'd seen him, they were certainly acting like they hadn't.

He stayed where he was, staring forward at nothing, as the remaining vehicles pulled out and left. His chest ached, but his breath was even.

Finally everything was quiet, and a few birds started calling up in the trees. He waited a bit longer, just to be sure that there were no stragglers, then slowly emerged from the brush and walked forward.

Had he not seen it, he would have assumed that this place was abandoned. The door was so rusty it looked stuck in place, and the dirt and gravel didn't show any tire tracks. The entire area looked abandoned.

330 emerged from the brush a few yards away, looking frazzled and with twigs stuck in his feathers. Donald assumed he looked similar.

They both looked at the closed doors, and at the rough road leading back into the woods. The question was, which way did they go?

In the end, Donald vetoed going into the base, it was far too likely that it was rigged to explode or warn the previous occupants that someone had gone inside, and instead opted to call in to the local SHUSH office with their report.

It took some doing, namely because two agents, one of which was a junior field agent, going to a random FOWL base that hadn't seen any use in almost thirty years and finding a hive of activity leaving just as they arrived on site was a bit unbelievable. Less so when Donald offered up his code name, because apparently he still had a reputation despite not being an active agent in some time, but it still took some persuasion to get people moving.

Then Agent B7 was on the call, and things were moving *much* faster, with teams assigned to each of the tracker signals, and one team to investigate the base itself. Donald let himself and 330 be sidelined to

the command center while the local agents went in, explaining to 330 in a side comment that fighting to remain the primary agents was rarely worth the effort, and alienating your coworkers was a great way to end up a renegade that nobody trusted.

Not that he was overly worried about 330 doing so, he hadn't even protested leaving the site once the new agents arrived, but as the senior agent it was still his role to teach and guide, as much as necessary.

At the Command Center, a permanent one this time, B7 met them at the ground floor bullpen, looking even more tired than the last time they'd met.

"I'm beginning to think you're a trouble magnet, Double Duck," she joked in a dead tone. Donald could only shrug.

"You don't know the half of it," he replied, and 330 snorted.

"I'm sure I don't. For example, what were you even doing there? Usually a mission like this would have been given to a local agent," B7 said, and Donald felt his spine straighten at her tone.

B7 was a senior agent, and seemed to be the local point of contact for most of Europe. If she didn't know that they had an assignment here, when Donald had submitted the usual reports indicating they would be in the area, that meant that the mission was classified above her level.

There were very few levels above her. She had to know that, so either she was asking to see if he slipped up, or she didn't think they were supposed to be there.

He eyed her, hiding the movement in a yawn, considering which it was. She had been present for the initial idea that FOWL and the Blot might be connected; it had in fact been her idea first, if he recalled. It could easily occur to her what exactly they might have been looking for. Especially since Donald had been assigned to the Blot case specifically, not FOWL.

Why was the mission classified to such a high degree? The Blot was a known case, had to be with so many agents on it, and FOWL was one of their biggest threats. FOWL was always a case, on some level. Why would this mission not be known, and why hadn't Donald been *told that?*

"I got to thinking about the power cells," Donald replied as casually as he could, "and how difficult they were to transport. This place is so close to the villa, and it's been abandoned for years. Seemed worth checking into, and a good mission for 330 and I to take as a first one."

He gestured vaguely towards 330 as he spoke; 330 rose to the challenge and waved awkwardly, every inch the nervous new agent.

That might not be acting, to be honest, but it sold their story, as B7's eyes cleared slightly.

"Bad luck finding such a clusterfuck of a mess instead," she chuckled, "Or good luck, maybe. Your trackers are still moving right now, so we don't know where they're headed, but we've managed to catch up with a few of the trucks, so doesn't look like they've been found yet. I'm also going to start some missions looking into other local FOWL bases." Donald nodded.

“Let me know if you find anything interesting, I’m curious how this wraps up,” he asked, and B7 nodded.

“Least I can do, finding this mess in my district. Just a hunch, huh?” And oh, he did not have her fooled. Not entirely, anyway. Donald shrugged.

“I have a bad habit of finding messes wherever I go. Once I broke up a weapons deal while on vacation.” He doubted that would sell, but he kept it up anyway, and resolved to call Ravenson as soon as they got away. Their mission description had not specified that it was classified, and that was something he needed to know.

Unless this *was* a test, not a real mission, and part of it was if Donald could follow orders. Or a test of who he trusted, and how much?

He needed a vacation already, if he was thinking like this.

“Really? Sounds like an interesting mission, you’ll have to tell me where to read the report,” B7 said, as she finally led them to where the trackers were being projected on a map.

“Oh, I wasn’t an agent at the time, there was no report,” he responded absently, already focused on the map. None of the trucks were taking the same route, but they seemed to be heading in one of two directions overall, implying two destinations. There were no other nearby FOWL bases, none that Donald had found in their records, but there was no guarantee that they would be using another one, or that this was FOWL in general. For all they knew, this was a new group that had stumbled onto the base by some other means.

Maybe if he kept repeating that possibility to himself, he would believe it eventually.

“Wait, what?”

Donald ignored the question, squinting at the map.

“You said your agents have got the trucks in their sights, right? Have any of them made any stops?” He asked, still looking at the moving dots and feeling uncomfortable deja vu.

Last time he’d been here looking at this display, a dozen people had been all but wiped out of existence in a blip, and there had been nothing he could do. It was only blind luck that none of their agents had been caught up in it.

He doubted that they would remain that lucky.

“What? Yes, they do, and no, they haven’t reported any stops. The trackers don’t show anything either. Why? Do you think they might be making a drop?” B7 asked, walking up next to him. Donald waggled a hand back and forth.

“We don’t know what was in those containers, it’s worth keeping an eye on. Since we don’t know who this actually is, we can’t rule out smuggling or counterfeiting.”

“What if they’re scavenging old FOWL tech?” 330 offered, stepping up as well. B7 shook her head.

“Agent 22’s missions didn’t leave much, and we cleared out what was left years ago. The only things to salvage would be the literal scrap

metal, maybe some of the wiring in the walls."

"Don't discount that; there was a FOWL base in Romania that a new group was able to get up and running a few years ago, and that was all they started with too." Donald noted.

B7 tilted her head to look at him.

"I remember hearing about that one. Their experiments were reported to have made the whole region dangerously unstable though, and after the mission the whole place was razed to the ground. Weren't you retired during that mission?" She asked, and the tone was even less casual than before. Donald gave her a brief glance, unable to ignore it, and gave her a mild look.

"I got called in to help, then I went back to retirement," he said mildly, because he knew his name should be on that one at least; the details were likely redacted, but as the only agent on the mission, it would be against protocol to leave his name off.

"Why call you in? I mean, an active agent would be easier to get up to speed, right?" 330 asked, less suspicious. Donald blew a breath out of his nose.

"Director Hooter wanted me specifically," he answered, "I had personal experience with someone on site and he thought it would make the mission easier."

Really, Hooter had clearly realized that if anything would get Donald out of retirement, even temporarily, it was having a friend be in danger. So as soon as he had realized that Donald knew Bugs Bunny personally, and that Bugs had been kidnapped for some kind of experiment, he'd called Donald.

And Donald had come. Hooter had been a lot of things while in charge of SHUSH, and willing to press an advantage was one of them. Donald had retired again afterwards, and thrown the next agent that came after him into the Harbor. Hooter had been ousted by Ravenson shortly afterwards, and the calls for him to come back had slowed, becoming more requests and less demands.

He hoped Hooter was still alive and aware that Donald had come back out of retirement for someone else. He'd been convinced that he owned Donald, that he was personally responsible for Double Duck's success and therefore had the final word on when Double Duck retired, and had never fully accepted that Donald was no longer under his command.

"Hooter, yeah. His methods were something," B7 murmured, looking back at the map. Donald leaned over to 330.

"She means he was a mean son of a bitch that we were all glad to be rid of. With friends like him, we didn't need enemies." He said, making no effort to keep his voice down. B7 choked a laugh, and the tension faded for just a moment.

"Agent B7, we've scanned the base and are sending in a probe. The video will be coming in shortly," an agent called from one of the tables to the side, and a new screen popped up with a blank feed.

Time to see what was left of the underground base.

Bugs (derogatory)

The short answer? Not much.

The entire base had been scrubbed top to bottom, nothing was left. The wiring and paneling on the walls had even been removed in places. The place had clearly been in use since the initial raid, since it was spotless instead of showing fifteen years of neglect, but there wasn't a single sign of what the group had been up to while they were there.

The agents were combing over everything now, hoping for a stray feather or hair to point them in some direction, but the first run had yielded nothing at all. Not even a sensor to show if the base had been breached.

"Do you think they intended to come back?" 330 asked. B7 shook her head, looking over video stills she had taken over the inspection with a frown.

"If they did, it's odd that they didn't leave any way to know if someone had been here in the meantime," she pointed out. Donald tapped his fingers on his thigh.

"If they didn't, why not leave the doors open?" He asked the room at large. "If anyone came by, it's obvious it was occupied recently. Even if we didn't know *who* was there, the base being in recent use is odd."

"Unless they assumed nobody was checking a base in the middle of nowhere," B7 said. Donald tilted his head, conceding the point.

“On the other hand, if they assumed nobody would ever notice the base in use, why bother moving at all? It’s completely stripped, they’ll have to rewire the lights to even see,” he argued. B7’s mouth twisted.

“Bad planning? Or if they’re some new group, maybe it didn’t occur to them to cover their tracks like that,” 330 pointed out. “We don’t know that any of that would have occurred to them.” Which was a good point, Donald conceded with a nod and a glance at B7.

“True, we’re assuming they’re smart,” she allowed. “Better to assume they are instead of underestimating them.”

“Unless we assume to the point we can’t accurately predict what they’re doing next,” Donald replied, and gestured towards the currently blank whiteboard with an uncapped marker. “We should start with what we actually know.”

The answer to that was also not much. Until they knew what the containers held, or where the crew was going to set up after clearing out, all they had were approximate numbers and resources based on Donald and 330’s observations. The only thing he could truly say was that they had been well-trained and prepared to move, but that could mean an elaborate organization, devoted staff, or that they hired mercenaries to do the work.

He wanted to wait at headquarters until they did have more information, but B7 insisted they both go back to the hotel for some sleep when it hit 4 AM with no new information. She was staying, because it was her team and her Op, but agreed to trade off with Finn when he got back from his own mission in the afternoon.

Donald took the opportunity to call Ravenson, no matter that it was getting late back home.

“Yes?”

“Is there a security issue with the Western Europe office I should know about?” He asked without preamble; it was late and he didn’t have time for niceties. Ravenson would appreciate getting straight to the point anyway.

A long silence.

“Not with that office, no.” She replied shortly. Donald blinked, taking a moment to consider her words.

“Is this something we can speak about over the phone?” He asked, tapping his fingers on his arm. He received a hum.

“At this point I believe so.” She answered. Donald nodded, even though she couldn’t see him, and stared into the middle distance in thought.

“This is about them moving as soon as 330 and I came to investigate,” he observed, and got an affirmative noise in return.

“Are there other suspicious events? I’m sure it wasn’t just this one time.”

“A few. We can discuss this further when you get back to the office.” A pause then a considering noise. “Your, ah, magical contact has reached out and we have scheduled a seminar for next week.”

“I want 330 in that seminar, if he isn’t already assigned to it. He needs to have the same working knowledge everyone else does.”

“Knowledge you have already?” She asked, mild, and Donald forced himself to stay calm.

“I have had more personal contact with magic, yes, but I will point out that it was in my civilian life and therefore could compromise my identity,” he replied when he could do so in a neutral tone. “Besides, my friend is more patient than I am, he’s the better choice for this class.”

“Better than you, the man that taught a number of them?”

“Teaching spies how to do spy things isn’t the same as convincing a room full of skeptics that magic exists and that magic users are being targeted specifically because of it. Trust me, you don’t want me teaching that class,” Donald insisted, thinking of how much he’d thought about lighting Darkwing on fire alone.

“Hmm,” was all Ravenson said in response to that, but she dropped it, so that was a win. “In any case, 330 is assigned, and you have an open invitation. I won’t ask if he knows your identity or not, but I assume you can handle things either way.”

Donald was willing to guess she knew exactly who José was, and was only avoiding mentioning it for plausible deniability reasons.

“I’ll try to go, if nothing comes up. It’ll help him to have a believer in the room,” Donald replied.

“Oh?” Ravenson sounded genuinely curious. Donald grinned.

“Are you planning to attend the seminar?”

“It sounds like I ought to,” she said, sounding amused despite herself. Donald chuckled.

“It will definitely be educational,” he promised, before sobering up.

“Permission to loop in Agents Finn and B7? They were part of the reason I proposed this theory, and B7 is pretty suspicious that I’m going rogue as it is.” Ravenson sighed.

“Granted. I don’t want to believe we have a mole that high up, but right now I have to consider every possibility. The only reason I don’t have any concerns about you is because this predates your rejoining SHUSH.”

Donald seriously doubted she hadn’t at least considered he was a mole, even if he wasn’t the only one, but he appreciated the sentiment regardless.

After wrapping up the call, he checked his texts again, seeing that Della had finally responded while he was running around in the woods.

Della: so… yeah, theyre for sure plotting

Della: but! now they have parental approval, so its fine!

Della: dont worry about it, its all goooooood

Donald: the more you reassure me the more worried I get

Della: okay a) rude, b) fair, and c) wtf are you doing awake???

Donald: would you believe long meeting?

Della: what kind fo job are you even working?!?

Donald: right now, an annoying one. Giant mess that probably involves embezzling, gonna take some time to sort out

Della: oh dang

Della: taht mean youre not gonna be home for a while??

Donald: i HOPE not, weve got other people working with us now

Donald: but I dont know yet

Donald: are the kids still awake?

Della: yes? Wait, whats their bedtime

Della: should I have been telling them to go to bed all this time?

Donald: theyre fine, I was just wondering if I could call them to say goodnight

Donald: and they should be in bed by nine, but the boys are pretty good about following it without being told

Della: phew, its only 8

Della: and…. No, theyre totally asleep

Della: weird, what kindaa kids go to bed before bedtime???

Donald: theyre probably planning on staying up all night tomorrow

Donald: Huey usually proposes getting extra sleep in advance so they can stay up later

Della: huh. Clever

Della: i'll let them know you said goodnight in the morning, ok?

Donald: thanks

Della: and Don? Dont listen to a word old man $$$ says

Donald: you heard about that huh

Della: yeah, i heard

Della: dont tell me you were just gonna keep that whole thing a secret?

Donald: …

Della: Don!

Donald: its… i wasnt trying to defend him

Della: DONALD!

Donald: What! He says shit like that all the time!

Della: omg language!

Della: wait

Della: all the time?

Donald stared at his phone, regretting his choices immediately.

Donald: thats not what i meant

Della: then what DID you mean?

Della: cause it kinda sounds like hes a total ASS to you all the time and you never said a word!

Donald: its not like people dont know Della

Donald: youre usually standing right there

Donald: Scrooge and I dont exactly spend a lot of time together alone

Della: …

Della: …

Della: …

Della typed, then stopped, then started again, for so long that Donald was about to give up and go to bed; 330 was likely already asleep, and they needed to be back at the Command Center soon.

Della: Alright. So I just did some soul searching, and have some things to say

Della: pls dont interrupt?

Donald: sure?

His phone rang.

“Della, I thought you meant via text,” he answered with a yawn.

“No interruptions, I said!” She snapped, sounding more serious than he had expected. Donald found himself straightening up, frowning at his phone.

“So! First of all, I’m sorry. I should have said something. I should have *noticed,* and I just- didn’t. I guess I figured it was just teasing, you know? And you usually get him back just as much,” she started, and Donald slumped. This was where she told him that this was just how Scrooge was, that he showed affection by teasing and Donald needed to not be so sensitive.

“Della, it’s not-”

“What did I say about interruptions Don!”

Donald’s beak clacked shut.

“But I guess it’s not like that for you, if this whole… thing with your boyfriends thing wasn’t different, to you. So, I’m sorry that things have gotten so bad.”

Donald wanted to point out that managing Scrooge wasn’t her job, but he kept his mouth shut.

“Anyway, I know it’s not like you just take it sitting down, but Donnie, you can’t just let him say that stuff. It’s not fair to you, and honestly, I’m kinda worried about how the kids are reacting to everything, you know?”

She paused, and Donald sighed.

“Calling him out usually gets me nothing but a headache,” he grumbled, tired of having this conversation. “He doesn’t listen, and if I push it he just keeps going until I lose my temper. *Then* I’m just angry Donald who can’t take a joke, and it’s exhausting, alright? I already had this talk with the boys, Della, but I’m not going to agree to a never-ending screaming match with Scrooge just so you don’t have to feel bad about him insulting me!” He ended up snarling the last, frustration creeping past his lax boundaries. He was stressed, and he was tired, and the last thing he wanted to do was tell people over and over again that he didn’t want to argue!

Della growled back at him through the line, and the plastic case creaked under his fingers.

“That is *not* what this is about! I’m trying to tell you to stand up for yourself!”

“And I’m *telling* you that I’m not the damn problem here!”

Ringing silence. Donald felt his blood run cold, and he let his head droop.

There was the crux of it, really. Everything was always his fault. Things happened because he was clumsy, because he was angry, because he was unlucky. Scrooge insulted him because *he,* Donald, was unwilling to continue fighting him about it.

“I’m going to bed, Della. We can talk when I get home,” he said, and he ended the call before she could say anything else.

Great, now he was wide awake and in an even worse mood than before. He set his phone to charge and laid down to stare at the ceiling of his hotel room as sunlight slowly drifted into the room.

At some point he managed to doze off, because the next thing he knew was waking up to knocking on his door. 330 greeted him with coffee and a grimace. If he’d heard anything of the phone conversation earlier, he didn’t say.

Della had called him back once, but hadn’t left a message or anything else. There was also an unread one from Drake Mallard, of all people.

Drake: so I heard from LP you got two boyfriends?

Donald: you didnt see the video? It was all over the place on friday

Donald: so i heard

Drake: nope, been busy with a work thing

Drake: night work thing, i mean

Drake: LP wants to do a double date, what do you think?

Donald: i think my schedule is a mess but I would love to when Im back in the states

Donald: might be a bit though

Drake: work thing?

Donald: something like that

Donald tossed the phone into his bag as they reached the car; it was a short drive to the Command Center. 330 eyed him with mild interest.

“You’ve been glued to that since we left,” he offered in a joking tone. “It’s a bit weird.” Donald sighed, rubbing his face. 330 was teasing, but he was also right, Donald was sorely off his game, and he couldn’t afford that right now.

“A few things going on at home right now. Sorry about the

distraction," he replied, and 330 shrugged.

"We're not working yet," was all he said to that, then gave Donald a pensive frown. "Speaking of that, why didn't we tell Agent B7 what the mission is about? And why wouldn't it be in the system? She's got the clearance for it, I checked last night."

"So did I, with Director Ravenson," Donald answered; he'd checked their car for bugs before they left, and felt reasonably secure in speaking. "She's concerned about a mole and removed the whole thing from the servers. Our entire mission brief, not just this trip."

330 stared at him, face pale and tight.

"She's- is she sure?" 330 asked, voice betraying his youth. Donald shook his head.

"Just a suspicion, based on the timing of the group leaving yesterday. Think about it; if we had been even a bit later, or if we'd gone to the main door like we planned, they would have been long gone by the time we arrived."

330 frowned.

"It can't just be our mission making her suspicious; that's paranoid even for a SHUSH director," he said confidently, despite only knowing exactly one director. "There had to be more of them."

Donald nodded briefly, and they arrived at the Command Center.

“I’m going to loop in B7 and Finn, if he’s here. You go and see if there have been any updates on the trackers.”

Both B7 and Finn were in a side office, looking grim. Donald knocked, stepped in when he got a brief nod, and closed the door. Ignoring the two bewildered (and increasingly suspicious) looks he received, he went through the room thoroughly for bugs and any other listening devices.

“Agent Double Duck, we’re in a secure facility, do you really think-” B7 was cut off when he found one, hidden on the interior of the wheel of an office chair. He tossed it into a bag from his pocket; they might be able to track where it was sending information, if it wasn’t just a recording device.

There were two others; one placed under the F9 key of the computer keyboard, the other in a light fixture. He eyed the one in the lights with interest; it was the most obvious location to pick, which could mean an amateur placed it, or it could mean whoever placed it assumed they wouldn’t bother checking the obvious places.

He disposed of them all in silence, bagging the pieces and tossing it into the hallway to examine later. Or give to the Tech department.

“Well, this is a good time to let you know that the Director is worried about a mole,” Donald said with fake energy, because if he didn’t try to make a joke he might just melt down. He hadn’t expected proof, not so blatant and not here.

Had that bug in his office really been a prank?

B7 and Finn were staring at him. He looked back.

"That… would explain yesterday's events. I've been wracking my brain for a reasonable explanation for them moving *just* as you showed up," B7 admitted, rubbing her eyes.

"Excluding me being a double agent, I assume," Donald offered mildly; she winced.

"This is a larger problem than just the Duckburg office," he continued, when nobody spoke. "The immediate reaction time here, plus what we just found, means we either have a very active mole, or there's an infestation."

Agent Finn, who was clearly the best rested of them (and that was saying something, he looked like he hadn't slept in days), ordered a group of tech agents to scan the entire building top to bottom for any more bugs, and after pointing out the three they had found in one room, the other agents went about the search with the dedication of locusts on a field.

A few took the initial ones to examine. Donald watched them go, and wondered if one of them had placed them in the first place. If it was one of the agents doing the search, who would have to balance appearing to do their job and try to leave some devices in place. He had to assume Finn had arranged the groups to account for that, as they would know the local agents best, but what did he know?

"I'm sending messages for every other base to run a full extermination," B7 told them both; Donald warned her that communications were likely compromised, but she either had a plan for that or didn't care, as she walked on without acknowledging him.

Donald left them to their purge and went back to the bullpen, where he found 330 giving orders to a number of agents he didn't recognize.

"We need three of you to relive Team Alpha, three of you for Team Beta, and Team Gamma has requested an equipment drop; I have the details and list here, we need a team of at least two for that," 330 rattled off, completely unaware of Donald approaching from behind him.

He glanced at the board. The trackers weren't moving at the moment; it would make a good time to catch up and let their agents get some rest. The equipment request intrigued him though.

"Did Gamma reach a base location?" He asked. To 330's credit, he didn't jump, only spun around *just* slow enough that he almost looked dignified.

Almost.

"Double Duck! Yes, Team Gamma believes they arrived at their base, or at least a temporary one, and wants to attempt an infiltration," 330 explained, while the milling agents stared at them both.

"Well, don't let me stop you," Donald said with a wave, turning to look at the map directly, and 330 went back to sending out agents, all of whom snapped to follow his orders. After a few minutes they were all gone, and Donald turned back to 330 with a raised eyebrow.

"Nobody else was taking charge!" 330 immediately protested, and Donald laughed under his breath, patting the chicken on the shoulder.

“Just impressed that they let you take over so fast,” Donald explained. 330 was a junior agent after all, and likely hadn’t met many of these agents, being based in Duckburg.

“Oh, well… I think they knew we were partners and just assumed I had more authority than I actually do? Or maybe they’re assuming this is still our mission, since we’re the ones that made the initial discovery,” 330 suggested hesitantly. Donald shrugged, but internally he was curious as well. 330 hadn’t had any live missions besides the one at the party and their very first meeting, and while Donald was fairly well known, he didn’t think his name would carry that much weight.

A mystery for another time; right now he took over monitoring the new agents' journeys to the field teams. Teams Alpha and Beta were relieved without issue, the relief agents reporting they had been able to make the swap and had eyes on their un-moving targets again; it seemed the target drivers were completely unaware of their tails, and had decided to get some rest.

Team Gamma’s equipment was dropped and the two agents who made the delivery stayed on as reinforcements while Gamma planned an assault on the storage building that their truck had driven into. By this time B7 and Finn had rejoined them and took over as mission control, leaving Donald and 330 without an immediate task. Donald wanted to know how this all would turn out, but there was no guarantee that they would have answers right away.

Meanwhile, the other FOWL base targets he’d planned lingered in his mind; every minute they were here, there was a possibility that other bases were being cleared out with less scrutiny. The only reason Donald had planned this one first was because it had been the most likely, being so close to where the power cells had been auctioned off. What were the chances this was the only one?

His next target was a base in Germany, but now that they had some evidence that this was more than a wild goose chase, Donald thought they should get the local agents on the case instead. Partially for the speed, partially because there was just too much to do and B7 was aware of the issue anyway, may as well utilize that.

He couldn't speak to B7, she was taking over the Gamma mission with laser-eyed focus, so he grabbed Agent Finn instead.

"You're still thinking there's a link between FOWL and the Blot?" He asked, too tired to be curious. Donald nodded.

"The Director thought it was worth looking into. Either way, we did find something, and I'm wondering about other FOWL bases. B7 pointed out that this may be better handled by local agents though, do you have capacity?"

Finn let out a long breath.

"There are a lot of old FOWL bases," he pointed out, "and not as many of us. We can do it, but if this isn't a priority-" Donald was already shaking his head.

"Not every single one, no. But I want to check out the one in east Germany, you know the old Nazi bunker?" Finn nodded, but he looked puzzled.

"The only other instance of those power cells appearing was tied to a Dr. Ghast, who before coming to Duckburg was living in Germany for a few years. We haven't determined where he got the power cells yet, and he's refused to say a word since he got to prison." He'd been under 24/7 observation, the prison was a great deal more paranoid since the Blot's escape. He hadn't spoken a single word since his

arrest.

“That one, we can do. I’ll keep you in the loop if we find anything, but if you’re thinking the mission was compromised…” Finn trailed off. Donald nodded wearily.

“They may be long gone. I know, but if it’s been cleaned out like this one we’ll at least have some evidence that it was being used. Two right in proximity to those cells is something to work with, anyway,” He said. Not that he knew what they could do with that, besides one more tick in the coincidence column. He had more hope for these targets getting them information, or for their code breaking team finally cracking the auction list. He’d heard they had made some progress, but for code breaking, there were no guarantees until they had actual results.

Paranoia Paranoia

Gamma was making their initial foray into the building when Donald heard his phone go off, a few times in rapid succession. He hesitated. He needed to focus on his job, stop letting himself get distracted by personal issues. But on the other hand… What if it was one of the kids? Or one of the heroes needing backup?

It could be José or Panchito checking in, or in danger themselves, or anything. But he was *here,* and short of a magical miracle he couldn't teleport anywhere if they did need help.

But it could also be Mickey warning him of an imminent Kingdom Hearts portal opening up, and that thought made him excuse himself to the bathroom to check, while the Gamma team started heading into the building.

The first message was from the kids, just saying hello in their group chat. Apparently Lena and Violet were coming over for a sleepover, so they would be up all night and planned to call him later that night to actually chat, which was sweet. And suspicious. His boys were good kids, and Webby was a sweetheart, but this was piling it on, for them.

Unless they still felt bad about the situation with Scrooge, and this was them trying to make things better? If Donald was being honest, he'd been forcing himself not to think about Scrooge at all. Even during his fight with Della, he'd been focusing on *Della,* not the cause of the fight. He wouldn't be able to ignore that forever, he'd be going home at some point. Scrooge himself might not force the issue, the man was usually content to never handle emotions himself, but the rest of the family wouldn't let it lie for too long.

That all being said, he didn't have to do this *today*, so he forced the issue back down and went back to his messages.

Mickey was in fact the other one, but it was just a warning that he was trending again, this time for his comments on the airport video. Donald considered looking into it, decided that it was just one too many problems to think about right at that moment, and went back to the bullpen instead.

The first of the agents had breached the building and was silently making their way further inside while the others made their way to their own entrances. The storage building was quiet, the drivers apparently asleep in a side office, while their trucks sat alone on the main floor, surrounded by dusty, empty wire shelves. Nothing about it seemed like an actual base, merely an opportune location to rest, but the Gamma team leader said their scanners were picking up more space beneath the building that they suspected was connected.

The team went radio silent, but Gamma leader was wearing a camera, so the Command Center watched as the team silently made their way in; two agents went to subdue the sleeping drivers, the others moved to the trucks and loaded trailers.

Or, the empty trailers. The camera swung around to each one, but none of the many barrels or crates were still present.

Gamma remained silent, but based on their movements the team leader was now looking for hidden entrances to the potential sub-levels. In the Command Center, Donald swore.

“Any chance we missed a drop-off?” He asked, and one of the other agents in the room answered him in a tentative voice.

“We didn’t get eyes on them for the first hour, but there were no stops that we detected from the trackers,” she explained. So unlikely, which

meant this may in fact be a larger base. Good for intel, more dangerous for Gamma team, and it still meant they had no idea what was in the containers.

Two of the Gamma agents were running scanners around the building, looking for hidden keypads, latches or openings that would indicate a potential hidden door. The drivers had been knocked out and secured, the office cleared of potential openings and locked back up. The tension in the bullpen climbed every moment the agents were in the building; B7's spine was tight, and she tensed whenever he so much as breathed.

He hoped she was tense because of the revealed double agent issue, and the danger her team was in, and that she was just taking it out on the current mission. He hoped this, because the alternatives weren't good; B7 was a high ranking agent, after all, and if she was angry because of the discovery, it could mean they had a *very* high up issue, just as Ravenson worried about.

He made a note to contact the other regional control agents and confirm that B7 had in fact reached out about the mole issue.

Onscreen, the scanner picked up some opening behind a shelf full of worn, stained cardboard boxes. It wasn't large enough to be an elevator or staircase, and there were no electronics or wiring detected. The agent with the scanner hesitated; they gestured with a loose hand signal a question to their team leader.

Donald couldn't see every movement, the agent with the camera wasn't looking at their own hands, but the gist that he got was they were debating if this could be an entrance or just a scanner error.

He glanced at B7, who was watching closely but not saying anything, then at the other agents. Finn had left to check in with the returning

Alpha and Beta teams, and none of the others were speaking or even looking at the main feed.

Donald coughed, and B7's eyes snapped to him.

"There could be a mechanical switch behind the shelf," he offered, gesturing back at the camera feed. B7 blinked at him, her spine going even straighter, before she… slumped, almost, though her posture didn't really change. Relaxed, maybe, outside of the tension around her eyes. She opened the comm line.

"Agent W9, check the hollow behind the shelf again; there may be a pulley or switch that the scanner can't pick up," she ordered, before closing the line. The agents in question turned back to the wall. B7 turned back to him.

"Good catch, Double Duck." She didn't say anything else. The tension dissipated slightly, but it was more like it had been set to a simmer, not taken off the heat entirely.

The camera stayed on the shelf, which the two agents were slowly examining item by item, looking for a trigger or out of place item. Donald wanted to make suggestions, tell them what he thought was a possible trigger, but refrained; nobody liked a backseat driver over the comms.

Donald wasn't really used to being in Command instead of in the field. Standing here, watching the agent silently scan over the shelf, he decided he didn't like it.

His phone buzzed again. Just once, which he had to ignore. One agent brushed a heavy box, which clinked with what sounded like bolts, and the shelf creaked slightly to the left. A pause, then both agents' hands

darted back to the box, and the shelf moved to the side in a smooth slide.

Behind it was a simple pulley, which W9 wasted no time in beginning to pull.

It was hard to see exactly what was happening in the next few minutes, but from Command it seemed that the pulley opened an enormous trapdoor in the floor, which revealed a long ramp leading down into darkness.

As Donald, 330, B7 and the Command staff sat pinned to the screen, the agents slipped down the ramp, night vision goggles in place, and revealed the space underneath. The first thing Donald thought was that it was empty; not of contents, but of people. Besides the drivers on the top level, there was nobody here and no sign of occupation.

Had they been warned?

The empty room held a number of work tables and computers, and in the center of the room were the missing metal crates.

The agents spread out, clearing the room before they started towards the crates.

Donald didn't move, staring at the screen. If the crates held the power cells, it was a confirmation they had found some of the Blot's allies. If they didn't, they may have found some criminal empire in the making, or a FOWL movement nobody had known about.

W9 was the one that cracked the container first, after a long moment

clearing the case for bombs, trackers or anything that might indicate a trap. The metal screeched as it opened.

The interior was dark, too dark to make sense of for a long moment before W9 pulled out a flashlight to aid the camera. It caught the edge of a dark metal barrel.

Guns. Plenty of them, laid out in neat rows. Donald let out a slight breath. A lead on the Blot would be good, but weapons off the street wasn't a bad consolation, and the power cells were so dangerous, it was a terrifying thought that so many of the trucks were still moving. Not to mention with their agents all in this room, if they were set off, there would be no escaping.

"What kind of weapons are those?" 330 asked, peering closer, and Donald went to take another look.

They looked normal at first glance to him, some kind of ray gun shape. They looked like a cleaner version of a blunderbuss, honestly, with the flared barrel and heavier grip. Then he saw the gap along the back of the weapon, where something was clearly intended to be plugged in.

Like a power cell.

"Duckburg PD found a shipment of weapons like that, two weeks ago," 330 said, before Donald could say it. The chicken looked troubled. "Gizmoduck was on site and confirmed there were power cells similar to the Blot's on site, and that the cells were designed to power them."

"Agent B7, can you have your team look for anything similar? The Duckburg ones weren't operational," Donald added, managing to

make it a request instead of an order. B7 nodded, already speaking into her comm, while the other agents in the bullpen began making calls.

Gamma team found more weapons, and matching power cells, but they were dead, and nothing on-site appeared to be able to charge them. The police report had been acquired and the agents were pouring over each and every detail and photo, trying to determine if the weapons were a match.

Donald felt like they were missing something; this was now the second location with these weapons and cells, and neither had a method of charging them. If the Blot, or whoever was working with him, wanted these to be used, surely they would be providing the energy as well?

And sure, there were two other locations for them to find, based on the still moving convoys Alpha and Beta teams were tailing, but these weapons, at this location, were effectively useless until they were able to be charged. Even if the other teams had charged power cells, they still needed to get them to each other.

It was a puzzle, and one he chewed over as Gamma team carefully removed the weapons, placed listening devices and bugs around the location, and reset it as though they'd never been there. The two drivers never even woke up and would hopefully be none the wiser. B7 was tentatively enthusiastic about getting more information, and seemed calmer now that her team was leaving. Alpha and Beta teams were still trailing their convoys, nothing had changed, and B7 had ordered a relief schedule written up for the next few days, in case the drivers were leaving the country entirely.

Left at odds, with their first investigation entirely taken over, Donald and 330 set off back for Duckburg. 330 was reviewing the police report in more detail, hoping to tie the two groups together and find another avenue to look into. Donald sent a message to Gizmoduck and Darkwing asking to meet to discuss the weapons.

“It feels weird to just hand off our intel to another team,” 330 said, in such an off-hand voice that Donald was immediately suspicious. He turned to look at the chicken, who was still looking down at his computer.

“The two of us don’t have the resources to chase down every single lead in this case,” Donald said carefully, watching 330’s face. “This will probably happen a few times on this mission; it’s too big for a team of two to handle.”

“Then why give it to a team of two?” 330 countered, turning to look at Donald now with a challenging gleam in his eyes. “If this is so huge, and it feels like it is, why would Director Ravenson assign it to just the two of us?”

And honestly, Donald didn’t have a great answer. A few theories, sure, but no true answer. Still, he made an attempt.

“We have most of our agents on either the Blot of FOWL; Ravenson wants us on this potential connection specifically. I think she’s hoping that events like yesterday will continue to happen, and we can pass along viable intel to the larger teams while being faster and easier to maneuver than a larger team. But. I don’t know for sure why we were the only two people assigned to this avenue. I asked, Ravenson didn’t say.”

“Why wouldn’t she?” 330 looked so lost, and so abruptly young, that Donald dismissed the idea that he was spying on Donald at that exact moment.

“I don’t know.” Because he really, truly, didn’t. He was used to Hooter, still behaved like he was in charge; the tests, the paranoia,

wondering which missions were legitimate, which were intended to give Hooter information about him to better manipulate him. Which cases were both.

Ravenson had largely been forthright about things, but her initial test had wormed its way into his mind, and now he was reminded that her first action upon getting him back in the field was to manipulate him. It made him think about the first mission with 330, a talented but undertrained trainee, and how she had wanted him to be an instructor. Was it all a manipulation?

And José was supposed to be going in to teach the agents about magic this week. Magic, when there was a magical terrorist wandering around, one they had no concrete leads on and no idea what his plans were. Ravenson had clearly been suspicious of Donald, but was that the reasonable certainty that he was keeping secrets from her (which, you know, was correct. He was!), or was it something more sinister?

He rubbed his eyes. Were these all reasonable concerns, or was he just so sleep deprived that the paranoia was taking over his thought process?

“Look, I’ll speak to her again when we land, see if I can get more information. But as far as I know right now, she just wanted to explore this idea and didn’t have the personnel to devote to it right now,” Donald said, and if 330 still seemed uncertain, he was kind enough not to say it.

Donald fell into a fitful sleep, haunted by vague shadows with staring, haunted eyes.

They landed in the middle of the day, so Donald went straight to the

base. He tried to convince 330 to go home, and was rewarded by the dead eyed stare that only the truly sleep deprived and Done could accomplish. So they went in together.

Base was a kicked anthill of activity. Agents were scanning every inch of every wall with scanners, people peering into lights and spaces behind paintings, a few members of the Tech department trailing each group with a metal box. Everyone looked either manic or grim.

“Guess word of the bugs in Spain got around,” Donald observed, and they walked on. A few agents noticed them, and whispers sprang up as they walked past, audible only because the wild chatter faded as they moved.

“Or something,” 330 muttered, eyes shadowed, clearly held together by spite alone.

Ravenson met them outside a conference room a few halls from her office, looking just as tired as they were, which was impressive. The conference room was stocked with food and coffee; she clearly expected this to take a while.

“You should have gotten some sleep first,” she pointed out as they all sat down. There were no other agents in the room, and Donald couldn’t help but fixate on it. Did she not trust anyone else here, or did she intend for there to be no witnesses?

He didn’t take a drink. 330 glanced at him out of the corner of his eye and didn’t either. He played it off as pulling out his notes and settling into a seat, while Donald just let himself lean on his open palm, elbow on the table.

“We wanted to get it over with. And if I go home right now, my family

is going to ask questions," Donald replied, not bothering to care that he had revealed some personal information with 330 in the room. He would likely have to get comfortable with that eventually, why not start with sleep deprivation?

"Alright. Then let's get started."

Donald provided the majority of the information, as the lead agent, with 330 commenting as necessary. He'd gotten a few more of the trackers placed than Donald had, so there was a bit more to discuss, and then they got to the issues at the Command Center.

"You found three listening devices?" Ravenson clarified. Her face could have been carved from stone.

"In one room. I heard they had found others in the rest of the building, but I didn't hear the total, or if they've finished their review yet," Donald answered. He hadn't checked this room. He should have; had Ravenson?

They continued. The Gamma team findings, the weapons, the Alpha and Beta teams continued pursuit of the other two convoys. Donald explained that they had passed primary investigation off to the local team instead of retaining control, since they were familiar with the area, which seemed to surprise Ravenson.

"I would have expected you to hold onto the mission," she observed. Donald fought off a scowl with some effort.

"We're just two agents," he pointed out, "Even if we'd been fully rested, there were three convoys to follow, and we didn't know that until later, so that's over a dozen tracker signals to follow. Plus the other bases that need further investigation based on this one, the

security breach, and the mole situation- we didn't, and still don't, have that capacity. Better to pass on useful intel to the agents that can use it and use the fact that it's just the two of us to our advantage instead of exhausting ourselves with the groundwork."

Ravenson eyed him, then glanced at his empty hands resting on the table.

"Shall I eat some of everything first?" She asked, her tone mild but her face was grim.

"As you said. It's incredibly suspicious that they knew to move the minute we arrived; any later and we would never have known what happened," Donald pointed out. She nodded.

"I, however, had a few days to relay that, as I approved your mission before the weekend," she replied. Which was a good point; outside of Ravenson, nobody would have been able to see the mission in the system until it was approved. It wasn't a perfect alibi, they could have been moving for days before Donald and 330 arrived, or Ravenson could have delayed the intel to give herself an out. But it helped Donald relax a bit.

Ravenson finally poured herself a cup of coffee, and 330 took a donut. Donald didn't take anything, but that was more because his appetite had truly deserted him.

"So, can I ask what other events made you think we had a mole? Obviously it turned out to be correct, but what missions have been compromised?" 330 asked, leaning forward. Ravenson eyed him thoughtfully, then glanced at Donald.

Donald nodded. He and Ravenson had been in the business for a

while, some new eyes might help them see something else.

“I’ll give you a list, but only after you both get some sleep. I’m aware you’ve been up and running for three days,” she said in a disapproving tone. Donald blinked. Between the few fitful hours of sleep in Spain and the time difference, he’d forgotten how long they had been on mission.

“The magic lessons are in two days,” he said, a bit nonsensically. 330 and Ravenson glanced at him.

“Yes, they are. 330, you’re slotted to attend. Double Duck, you’re welcome to join as well, but it isn’t a requirement,” Ravenson confirmed; 330 looked curious, likely at why Donald didn’t have to go, but didn’t ask. Instead, he finished his donut and coughed politely.

“In that case, I’m going to get some sleep so I can look at the compromised missions information,” 330 said, and Ravenson dismissed him with a nod. Donald waved at him, and made his way to his feet.

“Double Duck.”

Donald turned to look back at Ravenson. She looked, abruptly, so tired.

“I can’t demand that you trust me. And I cannot tell you everything; you're more than aware of that. But I swear, I have no intention of allowing FOWL or the Blot continue to harm others. I hope we can continue to work together despite the tension.”

It was something Hooter never would have said, and Donald reminded himself that Ravenson had removed Hooter from SHUSH entirely, may have even killed him, and clearly she had aimed to have a more open agency. More communication. He could hardly fault her for when she didn't succeed.

"So long as we're on the same page, I'm sure we'll be just fine," he replied, and finally he was able to go home.

There was someone standing outside the houseboat, and Donald was so close to just turning around and leaving he had his hand on the gear shift, before he sighed, parked instead, and got out.

"Don! Wow, you look beat," Gladstone called, looking both chipper and artfully windswept as he walked up to the car. Donald managed a grunt, shuffling to the boat, and bed. He should eat, he really should, but the idea of delaying sleep any longer was too much to deal with.

"Heard through the grapevine you'd be back. Wanted to run something past you," Gladstone continued, either entirely oblivious to Donald's mood or ignoring it out of hand. Hard to say with his cousin.

"Can it wait until I've gotten some sleep?" Donald asked, already resigned to having this conversation anyway.

Gladstone didn't disappoint.

"I mean, already been holding off on it for a while," Gladstone said breezily. Donald glanced at him, as he hauled himself onto the deck of the boat. Glad certainly didn't look like he had an earth-shattering secret to reveal. He looked as casual as he always did, really.

“Make it fast, Glad, I need to get some shut eye,” Donald finally relented, and went inside. He wondered if he could chase his cousin off with his bad attitude, but Gladstone had always been more than willing to ignore Donald’s temper. Short of him literally throwing him out the window, Gladstone would stick around until he got what he wanted.

“I just- ok, so in Spain… we both know that was you, right? That voice you were doing wasn’t enough to disguise you,” Gladstone said cheerfully, quickly, like he needed to get it out fast.

“Your suit was nice though,” Gladstone added in an aside, while Donald let himself slump against the wall.

No, he hadn’t honestly thought Gladstone was fooled; he’d let himself hope, sure, and when Gladstone hadn’t brought it up he’d pushed his concerns down, but he’d never really believed that Gladstone had believed he was someone else.

“Yeah, figured you didn’t buy that,” Donald muttered. “Thanks for not outing me at the party.”

Gladstone’s face twitched slightly at the word ‘outing.’

“Well, I wasn’t completely sure; had had a bit to drink, you know? And that voice really threw me off.”

“But?” Donald asked, curious despite himself. Gladstone shrugged.

“You’re still my cousin! And really, you can’t help yourself, can you?”

Donald blinked at Gladstone, lost.

“I asked you for help,” Gladstone said, quieter than he usually was, “and you dropped whatever you were doing to do that. Don’t think I missed you signaling to someone behind Santiago’s back.”

Donald *had* thought he’d gotten away with that.

“Look, I’m not going to ask questions. I have a *lot,* mind you, I’m just not going to ask. But I figured we should get it out in the open,” Gladstone finally said, when Donald remained quiet. “Especially since I live right next door at this point; nice to have someone in on things, right?”

Well, having Bentina in on things was certainly helpful, sure, but Gladstone? Donald didn’t know. He was more worried about him accidentally spilling the beans than anything else right now.

On the other hand, Gladstone *hadn’t* revealed anything so far, and the party had been a while ago. If he was going to slip up, surely he would have already? Besides all that, Gladstone only knew that Donald had been there, doing some kind of work while in disguise. It was just vague enough that he should be safe.

He nodded, because Gladstone was still looking at him, and because he didn’t really have a choice. He’d just have to trust that Gladstone could continue keeping secrets.

“So, just, uh, you can let me know if you need an alibi? Or whatever

you need, I can probably get you groceries or whatever if you want," Gladstone said, almost babbling, and Donald blinked at him again.

"You. You're offering to do my *chores* ?" He squawked. Gladstone laughed, awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"I mean, if you need it I guess. If I have time. And I'm already in the area. Obviously," Glad insisted. Donald relaxed; that was back to normal. Though 'in the area' was an interesting thing to say. Considering he would be living within shouting distance.

"Oh, and I guess the kids are refusing to go on any adventures with Uncle Moneybags," Gladstone added, glancing down at his nails.

"They're *what?"*

A Brief Reprieve on the beach

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You didn’t know?” Gladstone asked, in such an innocent tone that Donald’s eyes narrowed in suspicion on sheer instinct.

“Explain. Now.”

“Aw, didn’t you need some sleep?” Gladstone teased, and Donald growled.

“Alright, alright. Kids are pretty pissed about Uncle Scrooge’s whole *thing,* and honestly, can’t blame them after I heard. Anyway, apparently they decided that they weren’t going anywhere on a single adventure with him until he shapes up. They've got his number down, he's probably already going stir crazy,” Gladstone explained, looking all too amused at the whole situation. Donald was decidedly less so, even if some part of him was touched.

“So I can expect Scrooge to come down here demanding I accept his ‘apology’.” And here Donald actually used air quotes for emphasis, because if anyone would get it, Gladstone would.

Sure enough, Gladstone snorted a laugh.

“Yeah, probably.”

Joy. Scrooge never apologized; either it would be some fake ‘sorry you were offended’ thing, or he would just demand Donald get over it, and

insist that counted as apologizing.

“Hey, take it as a compliment of your parenting skills. Those are good kids you raised.”

Which drew Donald up short, focusing back on the kids instead of Scrooge. Apparently they’d decided to take matters into their own hands. He should have known Huey wouldn’t leave things be, and it sounded like he'd gotten all his siblings involved. Plus Della and Bentina, now that he thought about it; clearly this was the scheme they'd both warned him about. And as much as he wanted to be annoyed about the eventual trouble with Scrooge, he couldn’t bring himself to be mad at the kids. They deserved to be angry, to be *hurt,* and to make sure Scrooge knew.

Sure, Donald didn’t expect anything to come of it, probably he would eventually bribe the kids with some new adventure that they couldn’t say no to, and Donald would have to pretend everything was fine, as usual. Scrooge was good for that, at least; he never apologized, but he *did* pretend that nothing had ever happened. So things would eventually be fine.

‘ *Degenerates!’*

Or as close to it as things could get.

“So, I know that I said I wouldn’t ask any questions, but seriously, what *is* your job?”

“Classified,” Donald said blandly. Gladstone chuckled, then paused. Squinted at him.

“You’re joking, right?”

Donald smiled.

“Goodnight, Gladstone,” Donald replied, and started towards his bedroom. Gladstone probably wouldn’t snoop, and he didn’t keep anything incriminating at home anyway, too many kids in and out.

Donald slept late, only possible because of how jet-lagged he was. When he got up the next morning, it was nearly afternoon. In his kitchen, a basket of fruit was sitting on the counter.

There was a card tied to the basket, but all it said was that it was from… Della? Weird. Maybe another one of her attempts to give him a housewarming, like the gifts when they’d moved the boats. Also strange that she had snuck it in while he slept, but he appreciated that she didn’t want to wake him up.

He had a new message on his phone when he hunted it down, abandoned in his travel bag.

José: would it be alright if i spend the night at the houseboat tomorrow evening?

José: I have to fly out of Duckburg saturday morning, and your home is closer ;)

Donald: sure; want a ride from work tomorrow? Ill be in the area

José: i wouldnt say noooo <3

He grinned, despite himself, thinking about having a night with José. It would be nice to see him; maybe they could have the kids over then? It wasn't all three of them, sure, Panchito was working tomorrow night, but at least they could spend some time together.

Since it was there, he made a snack of berries and oranges, then went on deck to munch.

"Good morning Unca Donald!" Huey called from the beach; Donald saw a picnic basket and blanket setup well away from the waves, a large green umbrella stuck into the ground. Gladstone lounged beneath it in a beach chair, waving a lazy hand, while Dewey and Webby played volleyball further down the beach.

Donald made his way over, catching Huey in a hug as he sat down. Huey let out a contented sigh and relaxed; poor kid was as tense as Donald.

"Where's Louie?" He asked, watching the volleyball match with mild interest. Gladstone had flopped back onto his chair and closed his eyes. Huey leaned against Donald's side, a book open in his lap.

"He went to get some Pep, we didn't want to wake you up. How was your work trip?"

Donald let out a theatrical groan.

“Boring. Lots of meetings and paperwork, we think there might have been a security leak,” Donald explained vaguely. Hue glanced up at him, interest sparking.

“I can’t tell you much more about it, security reasons,” Donald added; Huey pouted, but didn’t look away.

“Why are you the one helping with that? Aren’t you a trainer?” He asked instead. Donald chuckled, shaking his head.

“I’m training someone one on one right now; we were going over some old data that hadn’t been digitized and found some issues. I’m not assigned to the problem anymore, I just helped sort out what we found,” Donald explained. He’d gotten the story straight during the flight, just to be safe

“Huh. Good thing you were helping!” Huey finally said, turning back to his book. Gladstone snorted, but didn’t comment, so Donald ignored him.

Louie appeared just as Dewey was narrowly defeated by Webby in their game, so Donald scooped up all four of them into a tight hug as they came back to the picnic.

“Are you gonna have to travel like this a lot?” Dewey asked, plopping down to the blanket and snagging a drink. Donald shrugged.

“I don’t know; I might have to while this issue is being worked out, it's an all hands on deck kind of situation, but after that I should mostly be in Duckburg again,” he said. He didn’t want to make any promises, and it was here that his backstory was biting him in the tailfeathers. He’d kept things vague so he didn’t have to lie much, but that meant he couldn’t create much of a specific reason for traveling without it

standing out.

“Can we come with you the next time you have to travel?” Louie asked then, sipping at his drink casually. The other kids leaned in with sharp interest.

Donald considered, face twisting. His initial reaction was no, probably not. SHUSH missions weren’t kid friendly. But there might be some that were just base visits, which would basically be a work trip, nothing too dangerous, right?

“We’ll see,” he finally replied, with mixed results: Webby looked disappointed, the boys were more excited. “It would depend on what I was doing while I was there, and you might be stuck in a hotel while I’m working.”

“Couldn’t we come to your work?” Huey asked, head tilted.

“Or look around wherever you’re staying?” Dewey added. Donald pursed his beak.

“There might be security issues to you coming in with me,” he said carefully, which was true enough, “So no promises there. You might be able to explore though, depending on where we are. Like I said, we’ll see.”

He’d ask Ravenson if there was a setup for things like this; he probably wasn’t the first agent that had family interested in seeing where they worked, and the offices were mostly generic. If he cleared it in advance, there was probably something they could organize.

And if not, he'd take the kids on a trip outside of work, when things lightened up a bit. Whenever that was.

In the meantime, the kids chattered about a new project they were working on (a research project about a ghost ship in the Bermuda Triangle), with Donald tossing in what he knew about it and Gladstone cracking jokes and sipping a fruity drink. Behind them, there was no work going on; apparently even Gladstone's luck couldn't defeat a contractor's packed schedule, and they wouldn't be back out for another few days to start laying flooring.

"I'm going to have an actual house warming, unlike you," Gladstone said breezily, waving a hand along the beach. Webby gasped in offense.

"We're still going to have one! We've just been busy!" She insisted, pulling a notebook out of somewhere to flip through glittery illustrations and elaborate checklists covered in stickers. Donald leaned closer in horrified curiosity, but when he saw 'giant cannon,' he decided to pray she couldn't get the budget for that and moved away. Bentina would put her foot down on anything truly dangerous.

Granted, Bentina's definition of dangerous was probably a *bit* different from Donald's, but he could veto anything day of. Probably.

Dewey was interested in the cannon.

Dewey was very enthusiastic about the cannon.

Now he was arguing that Donald should get cannons for the houseboat, 'in case of pirates.'

“Didn’t you have some, before they hatched?” Gladstone asked absently, glancing at Donald.

“Just two,” Donald replied, taking another sandwich. He grinned to himself as all four kids exploded into shouting.

“Where are they?! We need them!” Dewey screamed into his face, launching himself up to grab Donald’s collar.

“I don’t have them anymore!” Donald insisted, but he was laughing as he said it, and Dewey clearly didn’t believe him. He darted into the houseboat instead, yelling about finding them, Webby whooping behind him.

“Um, is that going to be a problem?” Louie asked, glancing at the boat with concern. Donald chuckled.

“Do you really think I would leave them on the boat for you kids to find?” He asked, and Louie relaxed back onto the ground.

“Alright, but why did you have them in the first place?” Huey asked, baffled. Donald glanced down at him with an innocent expression.

“In case of pirates.”

Huey didn’t seem to know what to do with that, and he turned back to his book. Gladstone snorted a laugh into his collar.

“You ever actually fight pirates in that ship of yours?” He asked,

tilting his head to peer at Donald from the corner of one eye. Donald grinned.

“Once or twice. Fought some shadow monsters with it, too,” he replied, and two eyes opened to meet his.

“Wait, really? Not the shadow thing, but you actually dealt with pirates in that old thing?” Gladstone asked, incredulously, and started to sit up again. Donald shrugged casually, aware he had three pairs of eyes tied to him.

“One time, I was sailing the coast with José and Panchito, and a ship came up on us from behind. Turned out to be a ghost ship, so cannons weren’t useful that time, but Pancho insisted afterwards we have weapons,” he started. Louie had rolled over to look at him directly.

“You fought *ghost* pirates in our houseboat?!” He demanded, and Huey nodded sharply in emphasis.

“When was that?”

“Oh, it was just after I graduated,” Donald said cheerfully, reminiscing, “We’d seen an island on the horizon and wanted to anchor off for a bit. When we got close, though, a ship came out of the mist and started firing at us. We think they were conquistadors, but we kinda sunk the ship before we could get closer.”

“How’d you sink it, if you didn’t have cannons yet?”

“Panchito had his pistols, we packed them with salt, and that took out the helmsman. The ship started to list at that point, and we managed

to toss some molotov cocktails on deck when it turned. Turns out, the ship was *very* flammable," Donald concluded, gesturing with one hand in a dismissive sort of way, grinning at the surprised and delighted expressions that met his.

"Did you get to the island they were protecting?" Huey asked eagerly, book abandoned to the side. Louie's phone was dark and limp in his hands.

"Well, sure, we had to know what they had been protecting at that point!" Donald explained cheerfully, recalling the heat of the white sand burning his eyes and feet as they landed on the shore. The smell of salt had been thick enough to almost choke on, and the beach itself had been laid thick with piles of rotting seaweed where the water hadn't washed it away.

"Island is selling it a bit highly, though, it wasn't much more than a sandbar. Probably sunk into the water entirely most of the year, which was why we guessed nobody had reported a ship in the area… the ghosts would only have to defend the land if there was land, we thought," Donald said thoughtfully. "Ghost ships are usually tied to a task, not a place. Our theory was they died shortly after hiding their treasure, so their compulsion was to protect it at all costs."

He was interrupted by Dewey and Webby getting back, Huey catching them up (cue excited screaming), before they got back on track. Webby was watching him with sparkles in her eyes, and Dewey was sitting so close Donald could feel his breath.

"What was on it?! Was it pirate treasure?!" He demanded, leaning impossibly closer. Donald snorted a laugh and shoved him back a hair.

"Sort of!" Donald explained cheerfully. "We found chests full of tulip bulbs. What was left of them anyway." Dewey flopped back,

disappointed.

“Aww, why were they protecting flowers?” He grumbled, glaring at the sky like it had personally affronted him.

“Well, tulip bulbs were worth more than gold for a while,” Donald started to explain, before Huey took over.

“There’s a record of a single bulb being used to buy a few acres of land!” He explained enthusiastically, pulling out his Junior Woodchucks Guidebook and flipping it open.

“ *How,”* Louie demanded, “do you have an entry about *tulips* in that book?” Dewey nodded from where he lay, and Webby perked up with interest, always keen to learn things.

“It’s about speculative markets, technically, but it has the history of the trade-”

Huey started to explain, to the rapt attention of Webby and the vague interest of his brothers, while Gladstone blatantly dozed off in the shade. Donald sipped a drink and looked out at the ocean, watching the sunlight glitter over the waves.

He happened to glance up the hill a while later, blinking away eye spots, and saw Della making her way towards them, uncharacteristically slow. Donald couldn’t help it, he sighed, shoulders dropping for a moment before he steeled his spine and sat up, preparing for the inevitable argument. He’d ignored her call after all, Della didn’t like to leave things unfinished.

But when he caught her eye again, she paused, tilting her head, before approaching again.

“Hey guys! Who’s ready to take me on in volleyball!” She shouted as she arrived, gaining the attention of everyone at once; Dewey immediately called her challenge and sprang to his feet, grabbing Webby’s hand. Their movements were well choreographed, as usual for the pair, Webby flipping over Dewey’s head and then holding up her hands for him to handspring over her. Donald was impressed.

“Come on, Glad, Don? I’m gonna need a partner to beat them!” Della asked, looking hopeful. Her eyes lingered on Donald for a moment longer. He stared back, trying to read her expression, but for once she was a closed book.

“Not Uncle Gladstone! He’ll cream us!”

“What, you think I won’t?” Donald squawked, forgetting his staring contest to glare at Dewey, who whistled innocently.

“Fine, you and me,” Donald growled, grabbing Della’s hand as he stood and stomped over to the rough volleyball court.

“Woo! Go Unca Donald!” Louie cheered from the blanket, cheerful in the shade.

“What, my own brother isn’t gonna cheer for us?!”

“Yeah, we’re gonna kick your behinds!” Webby shouted, pointing dramatically. Tame for one of her threats, maybe she was learning from the boys.

“And once we defeat you we’ll sacrifice your bodies to the gods!” Yeah, that was more like it.

Della winced; Donald shrugged.

“You’ll have to win first,” he called back.

Six games later, they were tied. Della had had to take several breaks to clean out the gears of her leg, grumbling about moon dust not being nearly as gritty, while Louie and Gladstone made bets. Gladstone, thankfully, was only betting on specific events instead of a winner, like Donald tripping over a non-existent rock or Webby doing a jump off of Dewey’s back to spike the ball.

Since the sun was setting behind them, Gladstone had ordered pizza (so it turned out that they would deliver here, good to know), and the tie was allowed to stand ‘until next time,’ Dewey had said in a dark, threatening tone; Della shuddered.

Gladstone had also, at some point in the last few days, gotten string lights and hung them in a few of the trees around his bungalow, giving the area a pleasant glow. There was a chill in the air after dark; Donald suggested they build a fire, which Huey was happy to take over setting up, directing everyone on how to get the perfect flame for s'mores.

It was a good day. Donald felt relaxed, content, the kids milled around eating marshmallows and pizza, Della and Gladstone playfully argued about something or other.

But eventually the sun was fully set, the kids were yawning and

making their way up the hill, Della behind them, and Donald was putting out the fire while Gladstone tossed out the garbage. Della kept glancing back at them, frowning pensively, but eventually she disappeared into the looming trees and they lost eye contact.

Donald put it aside and focused on sweeping out the coals.

“Thanks,” Donald said quietly, when the silence had dragged on a bit too long.

“It’s just pizza,” Gladstone said dismissively, waving a hand. Which in and of itself was unusual, for him. Not taking the gratitude as his due with a smug grin. Seemed they both were changing how they handled each other.

“Not just for the pizza,” Donald replied, and vaguely gestured around the beach. Glad smiled. It wasn’t a smug expression, just a pleased, gentle smile.

“You’re welcome.”

Chapter End Notes

This entire story was just a ploy to tell you about the Dutch tulip trade

Wait, who are you?

Chapter Notes

> hey everyone! I'll be out of town this weekend, so this chapter is early :) enjoy!

Morning dawned gray and dreary, the clear skies from the day before long gone. Donald went into SHUSH early, hoping to catch up on mundane emails and paperwork before José's seminar in the afternoon. Besides that, Gizmoduck was apparently going to be here to go over the new weapons they'd found, and Donald wasn't confident enough in his Double Duck persona to try and interact directly with the hero.

Which was slightly problematic, since he did need to be present for the weapons information, so he needed a plausible reason to avoid meeting the hero that nobody would question. Ravenson obviously would back him, but 330 and the rest of R&D would likely be curious. And in a spy agency, curiosity often led to snooping, which Donald couldn't afford.

So. To the office, reviewing reports that had come in. Nothing new from Spain, seemed the other convoys had been intercepted, but they had only been moving loose mechanical parts. Salvaged from the FOWL base? Dismantled machinery related to the magic weapons? Their tech agents were going over the pieces to try and find out, but the process of reverse-engineering them would likely take a while.

A new email came in.

Report:

Our team has broken the code on the auction sale list. We are in the process of assigning the names and organizations to relevant teams,

however one time stood out. The buyer listed for the power cells is listed only as a Mme Rouge, whereas all other buyers and sellers were identified by name/alias and their relevant organization. This will require further investigation, but I would tentatively posit that whoever filled out the list may have known her personally and therefore omitted certain details. I propose assigning an agent to speak to the party host and his assistant.

-Agent 4B4

Great. Another question answered, but it only left them with new questions. Why had that woman not been listed by name when *all* the others had been?

Donald opened up the Blot case file. It was a mess of linked reports and ongoing parts of the investigation; their R&D department looking at the power cell reports and early findings on the confiscated weapons (tentatively noted as related, for now), the now decoded auction list being assigned out, the massive attempt to identify who had broken the Blot out of prison… the list went on.

He found what he wanted after skimming the list for a few minutes, disappointed to find that there were no other new discoveries. The red-haired woman, titled now as Mme Rouge. There were a few blurry shots from the security cameras before the auction. None afterwards. And since everyone they knew who was affiliated with her group and the power cells died in the plane explosion, no other leads. Just these blurry shots and Donald's report from the overheard phone call.

He squinted at the photos. Her hair, even in these shots, was a vivid red, but that was the only clear. He could tell she was avian, but her feathers were so blurred Donald couldn't see the color. Grey? Brown? Some pattern?

Why couldn't he *remember?*

330 arrived a bit later, bright eyed and cheerful, and immediately said he needed to talk to the Director about the mole issue.

"So I don't think we have a *mole,* I think we just have one problem; the bugs," he said as soon as Ravenson's doors swung shut. She looked almost startled, while Donald frantically checked the room for bugs instead of offering an explanation. Sure, Ravenson had purged the building two days ago, and probably checked her office this morning, but couldn't be too careful, right?

There were none.

"See, they're actually really clever nanobots, not just standard listening devices," 330 continued. Donald blinked; nanobots rang a bell, but he couldn't place why.

"R&D has been all over their tech, it's not anything they've seen before. Their programming seems to tell them to seek out a computer and look for openings to hide in, and they seem to be able to record visuals as well as audio.

"Which explains why we had so many breaches in separate systems; individual computers were hit at the same time," 330 explained breathlessly.

"How would they have been planted? We may still have someone placing them," Ravenson asked, leaning forward to stare 330 down. The chicken didn't seem to notice, pulling out a pile of hand-written notes and flipping through them.

“Since they’re nanobots, they didn’t need to be placed directly, so whoever made them wouldn’t have to get into any base. My best guess is that they were purposefully planted on something that would be brought inside, then they spread and started seeking places to hide.”

“Like the weapons we found?” Donald asked, frowning. 330 shook his head.

“No, those were checked over as soon as R&D realized the bugs were nanobots, they’re clean, and there were no new bugs found after they were brought in,” 330 replied. Clearly he’d been in R&D for a while this morning, or maybe he hadn’t taken the day off yesterday.

“Has anything else been brought in recently? Knowing what might have been infected could tell us who this was,” Donald asked Ravenson, who shook her head.

“Not at this base. I would have to go over the mission logs to see for other locations, and we don’t necessarily know how far back that might go. As 330 said, it seems we’ve had this problem for quite some time,” she said lowly, turning to rapidly type something into her keyboard.

“Let’s focus on what we can, then; checking everything we bring into the building, consistent checks, and trying to identify the nanobots,” Donald said, tapping his fingers on his arm as he spoke.

“We could try feeding false information into one of the bots, if we can safely isolate it. See who shows up to sabotage us,” 330 added. Ravenson continued typing, nodding.

“We’ll have some logistical problems implementing a clean protocol everytime someone comes into the base,” she said, less a concern and

more of a statement. Donald nodded anyway.

“Even when we deal with whoever this is, the tech is out there now; we’re going to have to have a permanent policy,” he pointed out. “So we were going to deal with that issue anyway.”

The phone rang loudly in the silence after that, with Ravenson distractedly answering while typing one-handed. She looked up at the pair of them as she set the receiver down.

“Gizmoduck has arrived to meet with R&D. 330, please escort him. Double Duck, I need to speak with you about another matter,” she said crisply. 330 nodded and left, haphazardly shoving his notes into his bag as he did.

“I assume he’ll recognize you?” Ravenson asked when 330 had left. Donald gave her a mild grin.

“Most likely,” he replied. She sighed.

“Inconvenient, really. You’re one of our top agents on this case, you know,” she told him. Donald frowned; he assumed most of SHUSH was on this particular case. Unless she just meant on-site? But no, everyone on the mission was here today for José’s seminar, and he would be here soon for that, wouldn’t he, Donald should focus on that.

“Let 330 take point, he’s been doing well and honestly, he probably understands the technical side of this better than I would have anyway.”

Ravenson chuckled at that, and dismissed him. Donald went back to

his office. He would prefer to go to the lab and listen in to what they were working on, but he couldn't afford the risk to his identity. Especially with Gizmo working with his uncle; the absolute last thing Donald wanted was for Scrooge to know about his work at SHUSH.

330 sent him a message confirming that Gizmo had arrived, and they were in the lab. The scientists were trying to find a way of testing one of the weapons, so they were discussing what measures they would need to take to test it safely. Apparently a few of them, when R&D had started inspecting them, had what appeared to be a secondary power source that still had some power.

The idea of those weapons being functional, even in SHUSH possession, made Donald's skin crawl. Even without any power, they had an uncomfortable aura. The feeling of corrupted and stolen magic made his skin crawl, like it was screaming at a frequency he couldn't quite hear, but could feel in his bones. What made it worse was the realization that they were going to be giving a lot of SHUSH agents information on exactly how they could utilize those very weapons.

He would have to make sure every single one of those were destroyed. The research, the schematics, there was no way he could let the method of using these stay known, especially with their current data breach. If FOWL and the Blot weren't already working together, FOWL getting hold of that information would be another nightmare to deal with.

Even if they were able to keep them on-site, Donald had doubts about the long-term integrity of SHUSH in the face of bigger and more dangerous enemies. At some point, someone would consider using the weapons they had already; just for this enemy. Just this once, and then just one more time. Even if Ravenson swore to never use them, he wouldn't trust that it wouldn't come up. If not with her, then with the next Director.

But his only option right now was to wait, because they did need to

know what the Blot's new capabilities were, and SHUSH was in the best position to do so, even if Donald was getting more and more nauseous by the minute, thinking of how many people now had the potential to copy these things.

Maybe he could talk to Ravenson about it. She was reasonable, she might be willing to see reason on it. But if she disagreed with him, and then he went ahead and destroyed them anyway?

Yeah, having a spy agency directly after him wasn't an exciting prospect. Better to beg forgiveness and all that.

He realized he might be over-exaggerating the issue; magic weaponry was a huge problem for the magic community because of how they were powered, but besides being hard to defend against (which was mainly because of the rarity of the weapons), they weren't that much more powerful than a standard gun or bomb. Magic was an unlimited power source, but the process of draining it gave it limitations; a standard mage was a bigger threat than most of the guns the Blot had created. Maybe Donald just needed to push that they were niche technology that was more trouble than it was worth?

None of this was a comforting train of thought, and he really should be focusing on his work. Agent Finn had contacted him to confirm a new raid was planned for the other base in Germany, and he wanted to go over the list of other abandoned bases to see if any stuck out as potential options. He also should go over the unsorted intel reports; they were a collection of their agents and informants information that wasn't directly related to their current mission. A way of tracking interesting details or unusual observations that spies had a way of gathering wherever they went.

It was the job of a number of agents in their Intel department to sort through these, keeping up a database of updated information, gossip and rumors for when new missions were created. Usually nobody outside of Intel had to look at the unsorted information, mission briefs

were curated already for the field agents, but Donald's mission was being kept top secret and was too broad for any pre-sorted data, so he needed to check the intel coming in instead.

Instead of doing any of that, Donald checked the clock. José should be arriving within the hour, if his count was accurate. To maintain security, an agent was bringing him in through another entrance instead of directly entering the building. For the sake of Donald's identity, he wasn't allowed to be that agent. He wouldn't start his presentation for a while, from what Donald had been told; Ravenson had asked to speak to him with a few senior agents before the main seminar. Donald wasn't going to that either.

It almost made him want a normal job; knowing that his partner was here (or would be soon, anyway), and not being able to say hi, show him around his office and introduce coworkers. But it was only a passing fantasy, before he remembered that he would otherwise hate a standard office job, and in fact had hated them before.

His office phone rang into the silence, interrupting his thoughts.

"330?" He answered, slightly baffled. He'd just spoken to him, what could have happened in the last few minutes?

Or, apparently, the last hour. Huh.

"Double Duck! Can you come down to the labs? Gizmoduck has some information about our, er, the discussion we had with Director Ravenson this morning," 330 said, breathlessly. "We stepped into Meeting Room B110."

Said meeting room was actually a private lab for testing top secret experiments; either 330 had picked the literal first door he'd found

and hadn't asked anyone first, or he thought they'd need a lot more privacy than an empty office.

A private lab with Gizmoduck and 330. He had no idea how he was going to get out of this without his identity falling apart entirely. But what could he do? It wasn't like 330 wouldn't say something if he showed up in a mask, or some disguise. And even knowing that Gizmoduck might recognize him was a pretty hefty clue on its own, so that excuse was out.

And it was a fool's hope to think Gizmoduck wouldn't recognize him. Sure, he didn't see the hero *often* without a mask of his own, but they'd interacted often enough, and Donald was in the lab picking up Huey frequently. And that was without considering his suspicions of who was inside the armor; if Fenton was truly Gizmoduck, there was no prayer he wouldn't notice. He'd even heard Donald with a voice changer before!

He could just. Not go. Surely 330 could give him the rundown later?

But no. If this was about the security issue with the nanobots, that meant this was the Blot, or FOWL, or whatever new threat was infiltrating their bases and systems. Bigger than Donald's identity. No matter his anxiety at the prospect of having anyone know who he was. He would just have to deal with it.

He wished Bentina was on site today; he could use her advice. But she still spent most of her time at the Manor, and only came to SHUSH to provide intel or go over reports. Since she wasn't available, and he didn't have any time to waste, he left for Room B110.

The private lab was accessible through two doors; one was in the main R&D open floor, behind a blast wall and a few smaller labs that were rarely used. The other door was a hidden one, inside a senior agents

break area that was technically available to anyone with upper clearance, but in reality was only used as a choke point. It sat at the entrance to a number of high security areas in the building, and was intended to be a bottleneck if there was a break-in attempt.

Donald took the break room door, since it had fewer eyes on it, and was rewarded for it by getting a few moments unobserved in the lab while Gizmoduck and 330 looked towards the other entrance.

Gizmo looked… conflicted, if Donald had to guess. Which was an odd emotion for the moment; was he unhappy about working with SHUSH?

He coughed, and got to watch both of them jump and spin around. 330 calmed almost immediately, and squinted suspiciously at the wall behind Donald.

“Another secret entrance?” He demanded. Donald nodded, letting his eyes trail over to Gizmoduck instead of responding immediately. The hero was frozen, clearly staring through his visor. No obvious reaction.

“I don’t think there’s a single room in the building that has only one entrance,” he told 330, then turned to face Gizmo entirely. “Gizmoduck, I’m Agent DD. You can call me Double Duck if you want, everyone does.” He said, holding out his hand to shake. 330 snorted behind him.

“Which makes no sense, since it’s longer,” he pointed out. Donald shrugged.

“Ah, but you see, DD is… boring, so we needed to spice things up,” he replied.

Gizmoduck finally reached out to shake his hand, hesitantly, like Donald was holding a venomous snake. One brisk shake, then he let go.

"You swept the room?" He asked, letting the smile fall from his face. 330 nodded.

"Twice. Gizmoduck says there's some tech in here that won't allow any outside signals, but I wanted to be sure."

"Good," Donald agreed. "So, walk me through what you have."

It was here that 330 paused, and looked at Gizmo, who still hadn't spoken.

"Gizmoduck noticed some of the nanobot schematics on a monitor and asked to speak to me privately about them. Said he recognized their design and had an idea who might have made them," 330 explained, then stopped, clearly waiting for Gizmo to respond.

It took a moment for the hero to notice they were both staring at him.

"Oh! Yes, I wanted to talk about that, it's just- I'm sorry, you look really familiar," he stammered, and gestured at Donald.

Donald adopted a mildly curious expression, internally swearing. He'd expected Gizmo to wait until they were alone at least, what was he *doing?*

“Oh?” He asked, aiming for something between quizzical and frustrated at the delay. 330 had frozen, and looked at neither of them, face pale.

Gizmoduck went to respond, then drew up short, one hand half-raised in some vague gesture. He hesitated, tilted his head to one side in thought, then nodded once, decisively.

“Ah, sorry, I think it was some Tweeter video, maybe? Not important,” he waved wildly, as though to dismiss the topic.

“So, yes, I do recognize the nanobots. I know who made them. I think I know who they work for too,” Gizmo started to explain. 330 looked ecstatic; Donald felt suspicion crawl up his spine.

Wasn’t it oh-so convenient that as soon as they realized what they had, they had someone show up with answers? Donald wasn’t a lucky duck, that kind of coincidence was what happened to Gladstone, not to him. He smelled something rotten.

“I need to speak to them first.”

Okay, Donald thought, blinking, not quite what he had expected. He shared a look with 330, then looked back at Gizmoduck.

“Can you elaborate?” Donald asked, trying to grasp what he meant. Needed to talk to who, Gyro? Had these been some experiment that escaped?

“It’s hard to explain without breaking their confidence,” Gizmo said slowly, biting at his lower beak, hands loosely clenching at his sides. “I think I can get you information on their organization, but I can’t make any promises, I need to talk to them first.”

“Wait, so you know someone working for some organization that is actively trying to sabotage us, right now, and you need to check with *them* so that you can tell us more?” 330 asked.

“Yes. Just- I should be able to talk to you about it by tomorrow. I think. This week. Can you wait that long? You found them, they’re not causing any active issues right now,” Gizmo offered, getting more animated as he spoke. 330’s face twisted, doubt crossing his eyes.

“Gizmoduck,” Donald said slowly, waiting until both sets of eyes were on him, “Is this person in danger if you speak right now?”

A new thought was making its way into his mind. That theory seemed to be confirmed when Gizmoduck nodded.

“Let me check with them first, that’s all I’m asking. I swear I’ll tell you everything I know, I just need to warn them first, at least, in case-” He stopped, face strained, and Donald sighed.

“Fine.”

330 didn’t look happy; Donald couldn’t blame him. But if they potentially had a defector on their hands, it was more important to get that person out safely than it was to get information right this second. It would keep for a few days, and if it didn’t, Donald would still be more content saving a life.

And if this person didn't defect? If he was wrong?

He rubbed his face. No need to borrow future trouble, he decided, there was enough of it in the present.

His eyes caught his watch.

"330, you need to head to the seminar," he said, and 330 jumped, pulling out his phone.

"Shit! I mean- sorry, Double Duck! I need to bring Gizmoduck back to the Director's office, can you let them know I'll be late?"

Donald shook his head.

"I didn't need to attend, I can be a bit late and play tour guide. You get going," he said. 330 hesitated, for a moment, before he darted out the door.

Donald waited until the door swung shut. The room was silent.

"You changed your mind on what you were going to say when I came into the room," Donald observed, not bothering to look over at his fellow hero.

"You're PK, aren't you." Gizmoduck stated, and now Donald did turn back around, feeling one of his eyebrows rise. Of all the things he'd expected to hear, that wasn't it.

“You know,” he said mildly, “I think that’s the first time I’ve ever had someone think I was a retired hero.” In this persona, at least. “Hell of a retirement, moving to being a spy.”

Gizmoduck tilted his head slightly to the side.

“You didn’t actually answer the question,” he said.

“Technically, you didn’t ask one.”

Neither spoke for a long moment.

“So, I’m supposed to meet with the Director, I guess?” Gizmoduck finally said. Donald shrugged.

“I wasn’t briefed on the schedule, but sounds like it. Unless you needed to go back to the lab?”

Gizmo shook his head.

“I mean, I could spend all day in there, you’ve got some interesting stuff going on here! But we had wrapped up what I had so far, so I should head out for the day. Hero work and all, lots to do!”

The walk back through the main labs was quiet, the large room and following halls were deserted. Gizmo looked around with a frown.

“There were a lot more people here earlier…” he said, twisting as he walked along to look down other halls and through open doorways.

“There’s a training seminar going on,” he offered, though it was weirding him out as well. “I don’t know who all was assigned to attend.”

Gizmo gave him a sideways glance that he probably thought was subtle.

“You weren’t assigned to it, though,” he pointed out. Donald snorted a mild laugh, unbothered.

“I didn’t need the refresher,” he said, then paused, frowning.

“What?” Gizmo asked, hen he stopped in the middle of the hall.

“I don’t need it,” Donald repeated, thoughtful, “But it occurs to me that you probably do. Darkwing too, if he’ll be available in time…” So saying, he grabbed Gizmo’s hand and tugged him in a different direction.

“Wait! What do I need? And what about Darkwing?” GIzmo protested, stumbling behind him. Donald wondered if the armor was heavy without the wheel supporting him, and slowed down a bit, but continued onwards.

He should probably clear this with Ravenson before bringing him in; on the other hand, realizing the time, she was probably at the room booked already. So either way, this was probably the best course of action.

Besides, apparently he was a senior agent, and could make these kinds of decisions.

"Can you contact Darkwing and see if he's even awake, or in the area? I know he's mostly nocturnal, but it couldn't hurt to check," Donald asked absently as they rounded a corner. Gizmo made a baffled noise.

"Sure! Mind telling me what I'm supposed to say when he asks why?" He asked, though Donald could see him beginning to send a message as he spoke.

"We're having a seminar on magic," Donald replied simply, and then they arrived in the right room.

Oh, now he saw why there was nobody in the halls. José was already here, in a room large enough to count as a lecture hall, surrounded by very interested agents. He was wearing a dark red cape and matching mask, over a simple all-black suit. He looked good. More than good, he looked *striking,* his green feathers seemed to glow against the darker elements of his suit, and behind the mask, his brown eyes were sharp and bright.

"Ah, so everyone's here to rubber neck," he said, mostly to himself, and won a surprised laugh from Gizmoduck.

"Double Duck?" Ravenson called, and a number of eyes flashed to the pair of them. Donald walked the rest of the way into the room.

"I thought it might be beneficial for Gizmoduck to attend, if possible. Since we're all working together," Donald offered. She gave them both a look; he could read it as curious, despite her minimal expressions,

and gave a minute shrug in return. He could hardly explain that Gizmo had picked the *wrong* alter-ego to match with his spy persona, especially with company.

“I see. If you have time, Gizmoduck, you’re welcome to stay. So long as our expert has no objections?” She turned back to José as she said this. Donald finally met his partner’s laughing eyes, and let himself grin, just a bit, eyes trailing down the suit and back up. Double Duck was supposed to be a charming, but single, duck anyway, no harm in *looking* .

“I see no issue in one more student,” José said with a charming smile, gesturing around the large room. Despite most of the agents on base being here, as well as some that had flown in, there were plenty of open seats.

“Two, actually. Er, if that’s alright? Double Duck asked me to reach out to Darkwing, and he’s available if that’s fine.” Gizmo cut in. Ravenson sighed quietly, and looked back at Donald, who gave her a raised eyebrow in return.

“He’s also on the case, and I figured if one hero was fine, what’s the harm in one more?” He explained; she gave him a sharp glare in return.

“One of them has already passed our security to come in today,” she pointed out mildly. The other agents still lingering nearby flinched as one. Donald held firm.

“Either we trust him enough to collaborate, or we don’t.” He said simply. She eyed him for another minute, then nodded. As he turned, he caught José’s eye and winked.

Turned out Darkwing was very close, though Gizmo didn't say where exactly, and arrived in the room with a dramatic flair of his cape, trailing after the agent that had been sent to let him inside. Donald had taken the opportunity to take a seat near the back, leaving Gizmoduck between him and the entrance in the vague hope he could keep at least one thing secret today. Darkwing already knew him as both PK and Donald; he really didn't want to add to the list.

He hadn't been able to speak with Drake since their last encounter at Ducklair Tower, outside of texts. He still felt odd about that. Not bad, just odd. Drake had clearly thought it was *impressive,* and his reaction left Donald off-balance.

"Director Ravenson. Thank you for bringing me in," Darkwing said as he came in, eyeing the number of agents in the room. His voice wasn't quite the pompous tone he adopted with villains, but was still more serious than his civilian voice. Donald thought the tone suited him better, it felt more authoritative.

He glared at Gizmoduck when he caught his eye, but saved his commentary for a grumble under his breath.

"You'll have to thank Agent DD, as it was his idea," Ravenson said, gesturing to where Donald sat, because apparently she hadn't realized he'd walked away for a *reason* , but José coughed and drew everyone's attention before the hero could look up and see Donald.

"Shall we begin?" José asked, and everyone still milling around him took a seat.

Interlude: Magic 101

José waited for the room to settle, watching the crowd of well-dressed spies and lab coat clad scientists find their seats. Donald had taken a seat in the back, and seemed to be hiding from Darkwing Duck, though he had no issue with Gizmoduck. José would need to confirm who all knew his identity here, so he didn't say something foolish.

He had always known that Donald had secrets; the duck, funnily enough, made it clear that he did if asked. He seemed to prefer not to lie, and simply said he didn't want to speak on a subject if pressed.

He had confessed once that he rarely had to even say this much, as most people never asked at all.

Donald had told them he worked for a government agency in college; he'd never said what, exactly, that entailed, but José had had his suspicions. Odd hours, abrupt assignments with little warning, and coming home wounded… there were only a few options that matched. Not to mention him begging them *not* to simply show up, even for a Caballeros issue, but to call him first, or they would potentially get him in trouble. Now, being here in the same building? There was some excitement in having that additional piece of things, one more layer of the duck he loved.

That excitement was tempered by the circumstances; the Phantom Blot had been a well-known threat to him even in college, after the man had been arrested. The disappearances, the victims afterwards; it had been the stuff of nightmares, and the Blot's physical appearance had only emphasized the monstrous nature of the situation. Donald had only spoken of it once, on the anniversary of the conviction, explaining loosely how he was involved through a hero friend, and how they had tried to help the victims after. But there was no helping it; the survivors were permanently cut off from magic, and some never recovered from the loss.

So though he was pleased to see Donald's workplace, and to admire him in this new role, José turned to the crowd with a serious expression and focused on the matter at hand.

"Hello," he started, because he still had manners, "You may call me Green Bat, if you like. I am here to teach you about magic."

The room immediately filled with quiet chuckling and whispers. The two heroes, interestingly, didn't react. Nor did the Director, though she was less of a surprise. A few of the younger ones, amusingly, glanced at Donald and remained stoic when they saw his bland face.

Ah, his Donald seemed to gather a flock of ducklings everywhere he went.

"I realize that some of you may not believe in it, or assume this is all sleight of hand and parlor tricks. And much of the magic you have seen is a trick like this," he continued without acknowledging the titters, "But I am here to teach you the real thing. How to recognize it, how to handle it. Perhaps how to defend yourself against it, if time permits." Though he doubted the last, but the Director had specifically asked this last question when they had set up this session.

"You're going to teach us magic spells?" Someone asked. They sounded serious, but some of the agents around them laughed anyway; the agent that had spoken, a younger chicken, looked irritated at this, and waited for José to answer.

"No." He replied simply, and the room fell silent. "If you wish to learn this, I cannot teach you. Magic is something of a dedicated art to learn. It takes years of training, and more importantly, it takes the correct mindset."

Donald had always said it took believing in the impossible. Panchito had usually laughed and said that it just took a few more drinks for everyone to believe they could do the impossible. Like walk in a straight line.

José considered the room. He could tell only a few people believed him. He wondered why the doubters had come in; because they had to for their jobs? Curiosity? Perhaps they thought the Blot and all of his victims were crazy for believing in magic, and wanted to know the specifics, like watching a car crash.

“May I have a volunteer for a moment?” He finally called out. “I promise I do not plan to saw you in half,” he added, gaining a few laughs.

Donald, from his seat in the back, caught his eye and made a small gesture with his hand. José shook his head minutely. No, best it be someone else, in case anyone knew they knew each other. Though the immediate mental image of Donald as his magic assistant was a delightful one.

Finally, a large bulldog stood and made his way down.

“Ah, thank you, Agent…?”

“C4,” the dog replied, face pulled in a grimace like he was waiting for José to make a joke. He held himself to a small chuckle, and reached into a pocket of his suit, pulling out a fist-sized stone.

“Can you look this over? Tell your colleagues what it is?” He asked, handing over the rock. Agent C4 looked baffled, but took the rock, turning it over in his hands a few times.

“It’s a river rock,” he finally answered, “Looks like basalt, nothing too special.” He kept turning it over in his hands as he spoke, looking for a trick or other detail.

“Thank you. Now, would you mind trying to break it? However you like, but please do not throw it at anyone, I’m afraid the Director would not like that.” José said cheerfully, earning himself a few scattered chuckles. C4 blinked at him, but followed directions, first pushing at it with his hands, then setting it on the ground to grind under his heel.

The crowd leaned in, despite themselves. Most did not believe, but they had to watch, they wanted to see where the trick was, when would José do something magical, how would it work. So everyone watched as Agent C4 pressed down with his foot, and the rock stayed the same.

“Thank you, Agent C4. So, everyone trusts that you are not fooling around, and it is simply a river rock, yes? Nothing special, I confess that I simply found it on my way here today,” José said casually, as he walked forward to stand near where the stone sat on the ground. C4 took a step back, in fear? Or simply to give him space?

In either case, José again waited as everyone leaned in to watch his little magic trick. Even Donald, who had the best idea of what would happen, watched him with attentive eyes. Well, he would hate to disappoint.

Now, if José were more like Donald, or Panchito, he would light the rock on fire. Despite Donald’s affinity with the sea, he did so love Panchito’s element; their first instinct was always fire! But José liked a different approach, and so when he held out his hand, gathering the magic he could feel flowing around them, he didn’t reach for warmth. The magic around him swirled in the air like a lazy cyclone, and he

willed it into a breeze.

He raised the rock in the air, bobbing like a feather falling in reverse, and then crushed it into dust, letting the pile of grit swirl back down to the ground in a graceful puff.

The room was completely silent. José stepped back; C4 leaned forward, peering at the sand on the floor.

“Thank you for helping in my demonstration,” José told him, waving a hand again so the dust gathered in his palm. C4 nodded, still looking at the dust like it was meant to change into something else, and went back to his seat.

The room was still silent. Donald had leaned back in his seat with a proud expression, and he grinned wider when José caught his eyes.

“Now then, shall we begin?” José asked the room, and didn’t wait for an answer.

He’d debated, when Donald had asked him, exactly how he would teach this. Start with types of magic? Magic users? Would they benefit from learning about magic creatures?

In the end, he’d decided to stay simple, focus on what they needed to know the most.

“The most important thing for you to know, in fighting the Blot,” José said carefully, “is that he knows nothing about magic. He has not been taught, he has no books or sources. He is not *himself* magic in any way. What he knows, he has learned through kidnapping, torture, and

murder. Everything you will know, will be things I know through experience and training."

He paused, then swirled his hand, letting the dust wrap around in a slow spiral, glittering in the light. The eyes in the room watched it closely. He let it continue to swirl, then blew on it, scattering the particles wider.

"Magic comes from all things in this world," he explained, watching the slow cyclone, "For every natural thing, every plant, every element, every grand big place, there is magic, and there is likely someone who uses it, who knows its shape and taste. But the magic the Blot takes has to come from living beings. I can use the magic in the air around us, let it flow through me like the air in my lungs, used and returned to the world, but the Blot cannot use that same energy. Mages and such must take natural energy and *forge* it into magic for spells and creation, and this takes skill and training. He has to take it after it has come through me, after I have done that work. This is why he takes from living people, when there is so much power in the world. And what he has stolen, it does not return, and those he steals from cannot ever do magic again without artificial means. We believe they have lost not just magic, but the ability to cast magic as well."

A hand came up. José nodded at the agent, a blue bird with a tall crest of feathers falling in her eyes.

"What about magic items?" She asked, flicking the feathers out of her face. "Didn't the Blot smuggle magic artifacts back in the day?"

José nodded, pleased.

"Sim, yes. These have also been made by living people; a wand does not create itself, you must build it. Craft it, shape the magic that it holds and put it inside. Not all materials can hold the magic I want

them to, and not all magics are compatible. I must choose, and put in effort and time to complete the item, and that effort becomes part of the thing I have made.

"Or, perhaps you have a religious icon, an idol or a painting. For these, they may not be magical at the beginning, but if the item is prayed over, worshipped, it will over time gather that energy. Magic is about belief; if you cannot believe that a thing is possible, you cannot accomplish it. If I was not as good as I am, being in this room with so many that did not believe in magic would have made my trick impossible. If you believe a prayer will bring rain, or luck, that has some power; if a congregation of people believe their prayers will bring rain, this has more."

The bluebird nodded thoughtfully, leaning back in her seat and jotting down a note. Another agent raised their hand, further back.

"So would religious artifacts be something that the Blot would be going after? What would he prioritize?" He asked, leaning forward. Before José could answer, Darkwing turned to look at the agent.

"From what Paperinik said, the Blot was also happy to attack people; he thought that hurting magic people was the goal, or at least a part of it," Darkwing said seriously. A few agents turned to look at him. José thought they looked intrigued, and wondered how closely the two groups had been working together. Surely they should all have the same information?

"Paperinik? You've been in contact with him?" The bluebird asked, tilting her head. Gizmoduck, in the back, glanced briefly at Donald.

"I was the one that noticed the similarities with some museum heists and contacted him. He's been passing on information from the initial case," Darkwing replied, sounding a bit smug.

“Shouldn’t he be here, if he’s such a good source of intel?” A new agent asked the room at large. Darkwing scowled, but it was Gizmoduck that answered.

“He retired over a decade ago; he’s been happy to offer information, but I don’t think he wants back in the field.”

“Didn’t he show up to help *you* a few months ago?”

Gizmoduck let out an awkward laugh, rubbing the back of his head.

“Well, he’s still a hero, after all. And he had a way of blocking the blast when the power cells exploded. We’re working on replicating it.”

“He had *what?”*

The scientists in the room collectively swarmed around the hero, demanding information and schematics. Gizmo looked slightly overwhelmed, saying nothing had been tested yet, and he would get back to them with data.

José glanced at Donald; he was friends with the hero, he’d mentioned it years ago. Presumably he’d helped Darkwing reach Paperinik in the first place. Might have helped the heroes with the case, and now he was here, working it through his position as a SHUSH agent. How involved was he?

How *exhausted* was he?

Thoughts for later, when they had some privacy. For now, José coughed politely to gain everyone's attention again, and slowly people returned to their seats.

"I will say that religious artifacts depend on belief; if everyone in a church is only showing up but does not believe, or if the religion is very small, they won't be very powerful. Other magic artifacts will depend on the power used to make them, and how long they have sat unused. There is quite a bit of variability in this. People…" He sighed.

"If I wanted to do this, and rest assured I do not, people would likely give him more power, as it seems he can take the *potential* for power as well as the literal energy they carry, and potential is a powerful thing, in magic. But I would guess that the act of kidnapping is more difficult than stealing a crucifix from a church," he continued. Donald sat straight in his seat.

"I was able to overhear a brief conversation from someone we believe is working with the Blot. At least at that time, they seemed to be focusing on artifacts," he said, and José suppressed a shudder. Donald's voice was so unique, it was disconcerting to hear a different one coming from him. Uncomfortable.

"He might have been trying to avoid gaining anyone's attention," Darkwing replied, leaning around to try to see Donald. Donald casually shifted to stay in Gizmoduck's shadow. "It hasn't hit the news that he's escaped yet. Could be trying to stay under the radar."

"Gentleman. Another time, perhaps?" Ravenson said in a calm voice, looking at none of them. Darkwing settled back into his seat with a sheepish expression; Donald turned back to José and grinned at him briefly.

He was different, here. Confident, outspoken. With the Caballeros he was relaxed, comfortable, but this was more… Self-assured. No doubts that he would be listened to, something that Donald often struggled with. The new voice was very strange, to someone that knew him so well, but perhaps it helped?

"Now, most of the magical community went to ground after the Blot's crimes," José said, thinking of his own family. He wasn't too close to most of them anymore, besides his sister, but he remembered the discussions, if they should move to a more remote town, a more magically friendly village. Their family was well known in their town, people came to them for small blessings; if anyone came looking for magic users, there they were. Out in the open, no need to hide. Until there was.

They hadn't moved, in the end. His grandmother had insisted she would leave her home when she died and no sooner. But others in their town had.

"So while he may be avoiding people so as to stay, ah, under the radar, it may be that true magic users are harder to find than they were the first time," he continued. "And to our knowledge he never pursued magical creatures. But the issue with magical artifacts is unless you are a magic user yourself, or know how to activate the item in question, it can be difficult to tell if you have a genuine item."

"How does McDuck manage? He's always going on weird adventures for those kinds of things," one of the agents asked.

"I would assume he does his research," José said mildly, carefully *not* looking at Donald. Who knew what his face would be like. "It may be that he has a number of fakes as well; to my knowledge he doesn't attempt to use the things he finds very often, so if they are magic or not may not matter. But that would be a question for him."

“What may be a better question is if the Blot has tried to relieve him of those artifacts,” Director Ravenson pointed out. “Or anyone else. We should consider how he chooses his targets, and see if we can catch him that way.” José shrugged; he’d come here to convince the agents that magic was real, and to teach them what they needed to know. Truthfully, there was little they did need to know from a magical standpoint.

In fact, it might be better for them not to know too much; a magic expert would be looking at different targets than a novice, so if the agents thought like a novice, they would probably have a better insight into his next moves.

If all it took to find the Blot was a magic expert, he likely would have been caught by now.

“Does Gizmo know if there’s been any break-in attempts at the Money Bin?” Darkwing called out, tilting his head to look over again. Gizmoduck shook his head.

“We haven’t had any security breaches that I know of, and if there was one nothing is missing. Would the Blot take anything with him if he did get in?” He asked.

“The early heists didn’t actually include thefts, just break-ins. We don’t know if he managed to drain the things at the museum, or if he has some sort of magic detector now,” Darkwing answered, clearly frustrated to not have an answer. “So unless some magic gadget of his stops working someday, we have no way to know.”

“It would help if we had something we *knew* had been, er, used by him before,” a scientist observed, “Or someone, so we could compare and see.”

José made a face.

“Very few of his victims would be capable of doing that,” he said delicately, trying to think of the best way to dissuade that line of thought.

“Most of them went into shock and died shortly after, and the other survivors are mostly in hiding,” Donald said bluntly. The scientist glanced at him, tail swishing behind them.

“What about artifacts? A person could easily tell us they’d been attacked, but if we’re talking about a magic wand or something, it’s not like it would have reported a crime itself.”

“I don’t know if anything was maintained after the Blot went to prison,” Donald said casually, “A number of the smuggled items were returned to their original owners, but some were legally purchased. Might be a question for Paperinik, or the arresting officers.”

There was no way he didn’t know if that was available, José thought with an amused snort. Thankfully nobody was looking at him at the moment.

The rest of the day went in a similar vein. José explained the kinds of things that could contain magic; how the more processed a material was, the lower its capability to hold magic, how silver was better for protective charms and purifying effects, gold was better for holding power but wasn’t as useful for anything other than as a battery. How the older a tree had been, the more powerful its wood could be. Methods of telling a genuine magic item from a fake or a dud, if they couldn't call a magic expert in.

The agents, meanwhile, talked amongst each other about how they could use this to narrow down what artifacts the Blot might go after, or what kind of trap they could devise based on what would make a good fake. José was probably learning more about SHUSH and how they planned missions than he technically should, but the Director didn't seem concerned.

Was that because she trusted Donald's judgment enough to extend him the benefit of the doubt?

On it went, and José found himself continuing to watch Donald in particular. He didn't speak up much, but when he did, people listened. Very different from when he'd last seen him, worried about how the kids would react to them dating, and then about the Scrooge situation.

José had never known how to handle Scrooge. The man didn't like José or Panchito much; the few times they had met, that had been very clear. And his relationship with Donald had always been strained; at times, José had wondered if Donald would be better off cutting contact entirely.

And at other times, Donald had spoken of his uncle with such fondness. Times when they had gone seeking pirate treasure. Times when they had made traditional family recipes in Scrooge's enormous kitchen, while Scrooge talked of Donald's mother and grandparents. It had never really made sense to him, how they could seem so close in those stories, and so far apart when he saw them in reality. Two points that orbited each other but could never seem to get any closer without immediately being forced further apart, repelling each other like magnets. Too similar at times, far too similar.

The meeting wrapped up; José confirmed he would be happy to look over any artifacts they recovered, and the Director seemed relieved. He wondered about her; how hard it might be to realize there was a whole new world around them, and not only knowing nothing, but having no idea *how* to learn anything. Donald had been nervous about

revealing he was a magic user, always had been in all honesty, but José was fine with it. Even without the protection of the mask, he had plenty of ways to get away if he had to.

Donald had told them his old boss had not been the kind of person you gave personal information. But he clearly trusted this Director Ravenson, and José trusted his instincts, even if Donald didn't seem to trust himself as much.

A younger agent showed him out to the parking ramp once they had left the meeting, where the plan was for him to walk a block or two and catch a ride. The crowd in the room had still been planning and debating, having apparently forgotten about him entirely. Darkwing and Gizmoduck slipped out the same time he did, heading in different directions with their own guides. Darkwing kept glancing around the room as he left, something dark in his eyes.

The agent with José, the young chicken from earlier, looked at him curiously as they walked.

"I don't think I've heard of you," he said casually, eyeing the mask José wore. José feigned a hurt look.

"You have not? I am so very well known at home!" Home being the cabana, of course, but the agent's wince, before suspicion took over, was amusing.

"Truthfully, I do not wear this mask for my work. But I felt that some discretion would be wise. I believe that your Director knows who I am," José revealed cheerfully.

"Oh, so you're not with the other heroes?" The agent (and José should have asked for his name, it felt too late now) asked with interest. José

gave him an amused look and made a ‘so-so’ gesture with one hand.

“I’ve met one or two. But I didn’t come in with either Darkwing Duck or Gizmoduck, no,” José replied.

“What about Paperinik?”

“Ah, I don’t believe I’ve met him. Who can say though? He does wear a mask.” José replied. The agent laughed.

“Well, glad you were able to come in,” he said, more seriously. “Not sure about everyone, but I didn’t really believe in magic. It helped hearing about it from someone that really understands. Made things more real.”

“I’m glad I was able to offer some perspective,” José replied.

José had to wait for a bit for Donald to get off of work; he’d planned to take a walk originally, after shedding his disguise, but with the grim weather he opted to find a cafe and get some tea instead. The teenage cashier eyed him as he ordered, a pensive expression on her face, but she didn’t say anything besides a polite greeting.

The cafe was almost empty; José could only guess the weather was driving people home instead of out for drinks. It was also a bit early for the afternoon crowd leaving work. He took a table in the corner, pulling out his phone to wait.

José: our donald was very handsome in his suit ;)

Panchito: :O

Panchito: i want to see him!! why do you get to be the one to go :(

José: what can i say, i am very popular

Panchito: you are very likeable

Panchito: but! You owe me!

José: oh?

Panchito: yes! i want photos! of you both!

José chuckled into his phone, sipping his drink. Well, he wouldn't say no to a selfie, though Donald might. He was convinced that he didn't photograph well, and shied away from any cameras being pointed at him. Still, to treat their other partner, he could probably be persuaded.

"What's so funny?" A comfortingly familiar voice asked. José looked up as Donald sat down across from him with a small groan. Yes, much better without the changed voice.

José grinned at him, letting his eyes trail up and down Donald's torso. His suit was still a wonderful look, but it was curiously rumpled in their short time apart, as though the change from Double Duck to

Donald Duck had reset his luck and wrinkled his clothes.

“Ah, Panchito is very jealous I got to see you at work,” José said in a conspiratorial whisper, leaning closer. Donald snorted a laugh, letting his hand fall into his cheek.

“He would have hated actually being there,” he observed, which was probably correct; Panchito was a cheerful, energetic person. Between the office setting and the grim topic, it wouldn’t have been a fun day, Donald in a suit or no. Still…

“Imagine *him* in a suit though,” José said dreamily, and Donald let out a shaky laugh, face tinting red.

“Why would you say that! I’m never going to be able to focus on the road now,” Donald groaned, squeezing his eyes shut. José giggled.

Donald ordered a coffee, smiling at the cashier that stared at him as he offered his card. She didn’t say anything this time either, but José found it odd. They were just two birds in business suits, ordering some drinks. Nothing too eye-catching, despite his good looks, right?

“Should I be concerned about the staring?” He asked when Donald sat back down. Donald glanced at him, blinked, then looked back at the counter.

“She was staring?” He asked, baffled. José nodded; she was in fact looking at them again now, stealing glances from behind the coffee machines, though she looked down quickly when she caught his eye.

Donald turned back to him, and shrugged.

“Maybe she’s just bored?” He offered. José didn’t have a better option, but it lingered in his mind as they finished their drinks and left.

Donald was talking about making dinner as a thank you for coming in to SHUSH as they pulled onto the new beach setup (and wasn’t *that* an interesting change!). José thought it was looking nice; there was a firepit surrounded by logs set up the beach, the mostly complete bungalow under the trees was looking cozy, some twinkling lights set in the woods. Donald’s boat bobbing in the waves with the sun slowly sinking behind it.

José squinted at the boat.

“Donald,” he said, and Donald went quiet, turning to look up at the deck of the houseboat.

“I’m getting a bit tired of coming home to uninvited guests,” he grumbled, mostly to himself, staring at where Scrooge stood on the dock, watching them in the car with narrowed eyes.

Tentative

Donald got out of the car, José behind him, leaning against his shoulder. Scrooge's face seemed to spasm.

"Do you want me to back you up, or give you some space?" José asked quietly, just over the roar of the waves.

He wanted to say back up, he really did. If he went up there alone, they were bound to fight, and it would likely be physical, Donald's grip on his temper was already strained. On the other hand, if Scrooge continued his line of complaints from before, Donald didn't want José to have to hear it again. He could protect him from that, at least.

"Space," he finally said, regretfully, and José squeezed his arm.

"I'll sneak a peek at your cousin's home, shall I?" He offered, and Donald nodded, relieved. That would be close enough to hear yelling, but not so close he would be able to make out what was said. Probably the best compromise available.

He felt like anchors were chained to each leg as he walked up to the dock, and found a slow-growing fury settle in his gut. Not just at their previous interaction, or at the voicemail, but at the sheer *gall* of him waiting for Donald to get home. He wasn't allowed a quiet night with his partner without Scrooge interrupting!

He let that anger simmer, stopping a few feet away, eyeing the gangplank that Scrooge was blocking. He was tempted to just toss his uncle into the ocean; he could swim, he'd be fine.

Instead he crossed his arms, and waited.

Scrooge watched him. He wasn't glaring, exactly, but he certainly didn't look happy, and finally he huffed.

"Donald." He said. Just that. Donald waited another moment.

"Did you come here just to say that? Cause I want to make dinner," he replied.

Stay calm. Stay calm.

Scrooge scowled.

"Your kids are refusing to so much as speak to me until I apologize," he snapped. "No adventures, no games, dinner is silent. Whole bloody Manor is like a tomb."

Despite his aggressive tone, Donald could tell it was bothering him. After so long in a silent Manor, Scrooge wasn't handling a return to it very well. He hadn't when they'd briefly moved out either.

"Sounds difficult," he observed. Scrooge gave him a look.

"You're telling me you had nothing to do with that?" He demanded. Donald rolled his eyes. Always had to be his fault, didn't it?

"Why would I bother doing that?" He asked. Scrooge scoffed.

“They’re clearly doing this for your benefit,” he replied dismissively, and Donald frowned.

“That’s not- did it occur to you that *they’re* mad at you?”

“What? Why would they care?” Scrooge asked, baffled.

“Oh, I don’t know! Maybe they thought you were being an ass, or overreacting! *Maybe* they respect my life choices! Maybe Huey heard that voicemail you left and was really bothered by it!” Donald exclaimed. Scrooge stared at him.

“You- you let the boys listen to that?” He demanded, indignant. Donald snarled.

“He *lives in your house.* He heard you in your office, yelling about degenerates and layabouts! Don't you *fucking* dare you try to put this on me!”

“They *are* layabouts-”

“We all have full-time jobs and *that is not the point, Scrooge!* ” Donald screeched. “You can’t expect the kids not to hear you when you start yelling at the top of your lungs! Of course they were bothered by what you said; anyone would be! Do you realize how close I am to hitting you right now?!”

“Well why don’t you!”

Well. That was the billion dollar question, wasn't it.

"I'm not giving you the satisfaction," Donald growled, hands falling into clenched fists.

"Excuse me?" Scrooge sounded offended, of all things.

"I am not," Donald bit out, "going to hit you. You don't get to stomp back to your damn Manor claiming I'm violent and unreasonable as usual. So either apologize or leave, I have a date to get back to."

"What in the blazes are you talking about?"

Donald ignored him, instead glancing behind him for José. No sign of him; was he listening nearby, or was he still at the bungalow?

"Donald?" Scrooge… asked? He sounded confused, genuinely confused. This made Donald angrier, somehow, and he bit down a snarl.

"Apologize or leave, Scrooge," Donald repeated. His nails were biting into his palms. His face felt hot.

"What did you mean, not giving me the satisfaction?" He demanded, ignoring what Donald said entirely. Donald turned to glare at him.

"Every time we fight you do this!" He snapped. "Goad me until I take

a swing at you, then insist I'm completely unreasonable so you don't have to actually *do* anything like apologize or god forbid change something!"

Scrooge scowled, stomping forward.

"The only time you're remotely calm enough to talk to is after you've taken a swing at me!" He insisted, stepping up until he was only a step away. Donald could see that his eyes were slightly bloodshot, and he had bags under his eyes.

"So go on! Take your shot!" Scrooge held his arms out wide, palms spread. Where was his cane? "Or do you not want to, now?"

"After what you said about José and Panchito? It's *all I want to do,* " Donald hissed through his teeth, leaning a bit closer. His vision was beginning to tunnel.

"Then go ahead! Since when do you hold back?"

Donald let out a snarl and swung up his fist.

The air whistled around his ears.

His arm stopped, knuckles only a breath away from Scrooge's beak.

Scrooge hadn't moved.

Their eyes met properly. Scrooge looked irritated, nostrils flared. Donald held still for a moment.

"You lose, Scrooge. Now leave."

He stepped back. Stepped to the side even, to make it easier for him to leave the dock.

"That isn't- it wasn't a competition!" Scrooge insisted, not moving an inch. "I'm not trying to *goad* you into anything!"

Donald stared at him, then at his own fist, still partially in the air. Back to his uncle, one eyebrow raised.

"Ach, well, yes. I did mean to do that," Scrooge admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. "I thought it would make you feel better."

"Shockingly, I don't enjoy losing my temper or hitting people I love!" Donald snapped. "You think I went to anger management because I *like* destroying everything around me?!"

Scrooge's face spasmed, hands falling to his sides. He muttered something under his breath, a grudging whisper Donald didn't have a prayer of making out. Then he fell silent for a long moment.

"You think I was trying to-" he started, then stopped again. He looked frustrated, and Donald felt his rage fading into sheer confusion.

Scrooge grit his teeth, clenched his fists. Stared down at the dock like

it had personally offended him. Donald watched him, trying to figure out where this was going. Of all the ways he'd thought this fight would go, this wasn't it. He didn't know *what* this was, honestly.

"I wasn't trying to avoid apologizing," Scrooge finally spat out, like each word fought him as he tried to speak. "I just thought- I figured I'd give you a free hit. Only fair, aye?" He gave a humorless chuckle, glancing at Donald. His expression was unreadable. Donald had no idea what his own face said.

"I. Apologize for goading you, as you said," Scrooge finally grit out. "Shoulda just come out and said what I wanted; if you wanted to give me a wallop you'd have done that already.

"And I- I didn't mean to send that message. Didn't realize it *had* sent, until you replied. And the boys… they never should have heard that."

"You shouldn't have said it at all," Donald found his voice to say. Scrooge winced again, then scowled.

"I don't think much of these la- these *men* you're insisting on," he snapped, and Donald found his fists clenching again.

"You could do much better-" Scrooge went to continue, and Donald barked a dry laugh.

"How would you know? You've barely met them! Hell, I think *they* could do better," Donald exclaimed, running a hand through his hair.

The full meaning of Scrooge's words hit him as Scrooge opened his beak to speak again.

“Wait, you- this was because you think I’m, what, *settling?* ” He asked, and it felt bizarre to even contemplate, but Scrooge was nodding grimly, like that was a perfectly reasonable opinion to hold, and Donald needed to sit down. He almost did, right on the dock, staggering half a step.

“As I was saying-”

“What on earth made you think *I* was the one setting,” Donald said, ignoring him entirely.

Him? The always angry, always unlucky Donald Duck? Had he ever *heard* Panchito sing? Had he ever seen José paint? *Donald* was the one settling?!

“And why would you call us all *degenerates* if that’s what you meant!” He continued, because that was the word he couldn’t handle. “We all thought you were being homophobic or something!”

“What? I’m not homophobic! Launchpad has a boyfriend! Your sister flirts with that alien lass every chance she has!”

“I’m sorry, how was anyone supposed to get anything else out of that rant?!” Donald screeched, eyes wide and not seeing.

“I didn’t mean to send it to you! I was venting so I could talk to you!”

“About *what?”*

“I- the first time you see either of these lads was when you were all lying to each other! That’s not a good basis for any kind of relationship!”

Was.

Was Scrooge *worried* about him?

It didn’t make sense. Scrooge judging Donald on a different level than everyone else around him? Sure, that tracked. Scrooge apparently being angry because of Donald’s choice in partner? Yeah, he could see why anyone that *Donald* liked might be suspect.

Scrooge being worried that Donald's partners were liars? Because it would be *bad for a relationship?*

He’d been drugged at work. This conversation wasn’t happening.

“They weren’t lying to me.” Donald said numbly, because it was the only thing he could hold on to. “I knew where they both worked.”

Scrooge paused, frowning at him.

“I was there, Donald,” He pointed out, like Donald might have forgotten. “Fought a plant monster in the town square, if I recall.”

Donald shrugged.

“That part was a surprise,” he admitted, almost laughing because, really, how did that happen? “But the rest was just a joke. We wanted to see who could keep it up the longest.”

Scrooge's eyes narrowed.

“You made me pay for a lunch out,” he pointed out with a growl. Donald rolled his eyes.

“I’ll pay you back,” he replied. Scrooge drew up short, the clear anger at having to pay extra for food poofing away in a breath.

“Ah- well, that’s not necessary,” he said, and now Donald was staring again.

“Your friend did pay for the trip,” Scrooge said, and that would be reasonable for anyone else, but not for him. Donald stared some more. Pinched himself in the arm.

“Ach, alright! I’m going to- think of it as part of my apology!”

“You haven’t apologized,” Donald replied. “Not for this.”

He wasn’t going to get two apologies. He was probably lucky to have gotten one-

“I’m sorry.”

Donald let out a startled squawk.

Scrooge sighed, slumping, and really, where was his cane?

“You’re right, I never should have said any of that, least of all where someone could overhear me. The boys, you… I’m still getting used to watching my tongue around little ones, heh,” Scrooge chuckled, then drew himself up to look Donald in the eyes again.

“As I was saying… I don’t trust those lads of yours much. Though a mite more than earlier,” he continued. “But I’ll just have to- I’ll trust you know what you’re doing.”

“Okay, who are you and what have you done with my uncle?” Donald said, squinting. He didn’t sense any magic, but maybe a clone?

“Confound it lad, I’m trying to be sincere!” No, that sounded like Scrooge… alternate reality?

“Did Bentina coach you?”

“She did not- well,” Scrooge grinned sheepishly, “She may have helped me fine tune. A bit.”

“A bit,” Donald repeated.

Scrooge glowered at him.

“No need to act like I never apologize when I’m wrong,” he complained. Donald scoffed.

“I think I can count on one hand how many times you’ve apologized to me in my entire life, and still have fingers left over,” he replied. Scrooge raised a finger and took a breath, before he let a hissed breath out from behind his teeth and let his hand fall again.

“You owe Panchito and José apologies too,” Donald insisted, when Scrooge didn’t speak. Why not, he thought wildly, this wasn't real anyway. Scrooge tensed up, glancing behind Donald, presumably towards the bungalow.

“I- suppose I do,” he admitted. Donald, now certain that this was a dream, glanced behind him. José was nowhere to be seen, but long shadows were beginning to crawl across the beach. José was more of a wind elemental lately, but he’d been trained with shadow magics; if he wanted to remain unseen, he could.

“Are they both, er, joining you tonight?” Scrooge asked, sounding almost neutral. If you ignored the contorted expression on his face.

“Just José tonight, he’s flying out of Duckburg in the morning,” Donald replied cheerfully, relishing the awkward face Scrooge was making.

“Well,” Scrooge said, then paused. “Well. Might as well speak to José then, before you both go to have dinner.”

“Might as well,” Donald agreed, and felt a silent chuckle brush against his neck. Ah, that’s where he was.

“Did I hear my name?” José called, appearing just behind Donald as though he had been walking up towards them the whole time. Donald couldn’t help his smile as José reached out and squeezed his hand. Scrooge looked like he’d eaten a lemon.

“Ach, yes. I need to- apologize for what I said over the phone the other day,” Scrooge gritted out, though he made an effort not to grimace at least. “My comments were uncalled for.”

José considered him, face placid. Had they been younger, he would have likely lit a cigar, but he’d quit smoking years ago.

“I accept your apology, Senhor Scrooge,” he replied formally. Scrooge, who didn’t recognize the mild insult, blinked at the title. Donald, who was aware, winced. José didn’t bother with formality except to make a point.

“I do not yet forgive you,” he added, and Scrooge nodded, like he’d expected it. He always nodded like that though, it meant nothing.

“I deserve that,” he replied, and they stood in silence for a moment.

“I’ll, er, let you two go, I suppose,” Scrooge finally said, and stepped to the side so they could walk to the houseboat.

“Goodnight, lads,” he called as they passed him. José and Donald glanced at each other, hands still clasped.

“Goodnight,” Donald finally said, and they stepped onto the boat.

Inside, with the doors safely shut, Donald turned to José in a daze.

“Zé,” he breathed, “what just happened?”

José let out a breathy laugh, and dragged Donald to sit down.

“I believe I just got an apology from your uncle,” he replied with a chuckle, “We ought to check the weather in hell.”

How to use magic (without committing war crimes)

Donald would have loved to have a proper date night, but José's flight was too early for them to do much more than have a quiet dinner and sleep. José was only barely conscious when they left the next morning, grumbling into his coffee as they loaded his travel bag into the car.

Gladstone was driving up as they pulled out; Donald waved, but had to leave without greeting his cousin. Funny how that was now a disappointment and not the goal. He hoped Glad was just coming to say hi or visit the bungalow before the builders arrived to put in the new flooring, not to drop off breakfast.

His phone went off a few times as he dropped José off, still yawning but awake enough to give him a good-bye kiss, but he had to wait until he got to SHUSH to check.

Dewey: so… did you get a visit yesterday???

Huey: meaning, did uncle Scrooge come and apologize?

Uncle Donald: yes, he did

Uncle Donald: i did wonder if one of you put him up to it

Louie: we just told him you would be home, no need to be suspicious

Dewey: so he apologized?

Dewey: like, a GOOD apology?

Uncle Donald: a good apology?

Dewey: yeah! You know, say what you did that youre sorry for, how youre gonna try to fix it, not any of that 'sorry if you were hurt' stuff

Uncle Donald: that… is very specific

Donald stepped into his office, looking to see if 330 was in yet. His desk was empty, but there was an abandoned laptop bag sitting on his chair.

Louie: well…

Huey: we didn't think uncle Scrooge would know how to give a good apology!

Louie: cause hes awful at it

Dewey: so we told him!

Uncle Donald: you told him how to give a good apology?

Dewey: i did it first!

Louie: yeah, you go dewey

Huey: we didnt realize until later that we all did

Uncle Donald: you all separately told your uncle how to give a proper apology?

Huey: … yes

Louie: not just us; webby did too

Uncle Donald: …

Uncle Donald: thats it

Uncle Donald: im taking everyone out for ice cream after work

330 came in shortly after to grab his laptop bag, brightening when he saw Donald.

“Double Duck! We’ve got some data from Gizmoduck about blocking blasts from those weapons, we’re going to work on testing the ones with power,” he said breathlessly. Donald cringed, doing his best to hide it.

“Uh, are you okay?”

Clearly not a good enough job.

“I’m not fond of the idea of using them,” he admitted, “Even for a test.”

330, surprisingly, nodded thoughtfully.

“Gizmoduck mentioned something like that too,” he said, “He pointed out that these weapons were made with stolen energy and all; it’s kinda awful to use them. He even said that Paperinik destroyed all of them the last time.”

Well, it was nice to know that someone agreed with him.

“I imagine using weapons that were powered by hurting people isn’t something heroes want to do,” Donald replied neutrally, wishing he was in a mask at that moment. Paperinik was the one that had dealt with the issue, not Double Duck; he couldn’t reveal more personal concerns here.

“Yeah… our R & D team was split on the issue, honestly. Nobody wants to use them as they are, but I guess a few people want to see if they can bypass that whole thing about having the right mindset, and gather magical energy that way. From the source, instead of people,” 330 explained. Donald felt a bit nauseous at the idea.

“Part of that state of mind is knowing when to stop pulling,” Donald

said, before he could even think about it. “You take too much and you’ll kill whatever you’re draining. A machine won’t know to stop.”

330 gave him an intrigued look.

“Didn’t know you knew anything about it,” he replied with interest. Donald shrugged, faux-casual.

“I know a bit, that’s why I wasn’t required to attend the seminar yesterday,” he answered as relaxed as he could manage. “One thing I do know is that taking too much magic from something will either kill the magic user or the source; magic users have to learn restraint first.”

“Wait, if you’re using something that isn’t alive, how can you kill it? Green Bat said he was using the air…”

“And if you drain the air, it’s gone. No air. I don’t know if that means the oxygen itself is gone, or if it becomes toxic, but I do know that’s a good way to suffocate.”

330 stared at him.

“Why didn’t he tell us that yesterday?” He asked, sounding distressed.

“You’d have to ask, but I would guess because he didn’t think people would immediately begin doing the exact same thing as the man we’re trying to catch,” Donald snapped, trying not to lose his temper. “He was here to help us catch the Blot, not break the fundamental rules of magic.”

“Fundamental…?” 330 trailed off, looking at him with renewed interest. Donald sighed.

“There are laws for magic. Like laws of physics, not legal ones. I would assume Green Bat didn’t bring this up because the Director didn’t want him teaching us how to use magic, or he assumed we wouldn’t need that level of technical knowledge,” Donald said carefully.

“Technical knowledge you apparently have,” 330 pointed out.

“Yes, I know a bit more. It came up on a mission a long time ago. I can ask around for a textbook or something if you think that will stop R & D killing us all with the Blot’s technology,” Donald offered, biting back a growl. “Or we can ask for Green Bat to come back in and give a more in-depth lecture.”

José would agree in a heartbeat if it meant avoiding abominations of magic being used by anyone.

“That… would probably be a good idea. Either one,” 330 said slowly, voice low and slow. Donald took a breath. Then another one.

“I’ll ask around. Or see if we can reach out to Green Bat,” Donald replied when his voice was calm. 330 nodded.

“I didn’t realize you were so… involved, I guess. I can pass along those concerns too,” 330 finally said. Donald let out a hissed breath.

“I lived near Duckburg when he was out the first time,” he found himself saying. “I even met a few of the living victims. It’s not

something you forget."

330 nodded again, and he made his way towards the office door.

"Oh, I wanted to ask," he said, stopping in the doorway. "Do we have any updates on the base in Germany? I haven't seen any reports come in."

Donald shook his head.

"Nothing substantial. Agent Finn thinks that they had enough warning to clear out, it had that cleaned out look that Spain did. They're going over everything to see if there was anything missed, but nothing so far."

"So what's our next move? You and me, I mean; we're not assigned to the main mission," 330 asked, closing the office door and leaning against it. Donald shrugged.

"Right now we don't have any good leads. I'm going to go over the new reports to see if there's anything we can work with. What do you think?"

330 clicked his beak in thought.

"I would like to talk to Paperinik," he said. "He's the one that dealt with the Blot the first time, and apparently he's out of retirement enough to talk to the local heroes. We should talk to him and get his intel."

Aw phooey.

"Next time Gizmoducks here, I'm going to ask if he can put us in contact."

Aw *fuck*.

Donald managed a passable nod, and 330 disappeared back to R & D. Donald managed to write up an email to Ravenson, saying that something 330 had mentioned for a scientific direction concerned him, and maybe they should bring that magic expert back in to talk to them. It was all he could do right that second.

Truthfully, he didn't know if they *could* make any kind of tool that would draw magic from a base source, instead of a person or artifact. The Blot didn't like magic, had been pleased to hurt magical people and drain important relics and powerful tools. He was the only person Donald knew of that had even tried to incorporate magical energy and technology together, let alone been successful. He may be blowing things out of proportion, and nothing would come of it.

On the other hand, the idea of them even trying to do it… surely they realized the path they were looking down? Even if it didn't work, how long before they turned towards the sources that *could* successfully be taken from?

By involving SHUSH, had he created a bigger threat?

Ravenson replied to his email, inquiring about what, exactly, concerned him. He groaned and fell into his chair.

Director,

330 said they're looking into how to take magic from any source, as Green Bat mentioned that is how magic users approach things. I know he didn't bring it up-

He deleted it.

Draining magic like that is bound to cause damage or kill someone-

Delete.

We're risking becoming a bigger threat to the world than the person we're trying to catch-

He got up and walked to her office.

"Magic isn't like buying a battery, there are rules and limits to what you can *take* and what you can *use*," he said without preamble as he finished searching the office for bugs. He did this with every room he walked into at this point.

She eyed him like she thought he was going mad. He wasn't entirely sure he wasn't.

"I assume this is about our R & D department trying to access magical energy while bypassing the living person portion?" She offered, while Donald paced the room. "Their take on things was that it would be the better option to pursue, instead of using the Blot's methods."

“They shouldn’t be doing it at all, not the way they’re considering,” Donald grumbled, and Ravenson’s eyebrows rose to her hairline.

He looked around the room. There was a dying plant in the corner, set too close to the window and nearly fried by the light.

This was an objectively terrible idea.

He put out his hand. Ravenson sat back, eyes widening; fair enough, he was standing almost directly in front of her.

Donald reached out, waves crashing in his mind, and tugged. A small ball of green reached his hands, and the plant went limp.

He held up the glowing ball of green, facing Ravenson, and let the light fall onto her face.

“*This* is the magical energy from your plant,” he said coldly. “I’m trained enough to know what the limit is, how much I can take without killing it. Can you honestly tell me that R & D will know the same thing? That nobody at SHUSH will ever be tempted to push a bit past that limit?”

“Or,” he added, letting the energy bob in his hands, “that we’ll never have another security breach? Do you think FOWL will care if they kill something?”

He let the energy go back to the plant, tossed some of his own with it, and watched the leaves perk back up like nothing had ever happened. Ravenson stared at the plant like she’d never seen it before.

She didn't speak for a long time. Eventually she stood up, walked to the plant, and gently stroked the leaves.

"I never could keep plants alive," she murmured to herself, "It's the one thing I could never do. People get me plants, and they always die." Her fingers barely brushed the leaves, like she was worried it would die again.

She went silent again, looking back at Donald. He stared back, hands at his sides.

"If using magic is just taking it from another source," she finally asked, "How is anything left alive?"

"I'm not a good person to ask that," Donald said quietly, "I don't usually take. Never liked it, and... Well, I have my reasons. But most magic users do; they would call it borrowing. It flows back, if you don't take too much. And good mages give back what they use, later. Plant a new seed or build a new fire. Your plant doesn't have much to give; a forest can give for decades, millennia even, without being tapped. And every moment it exists, that energy is replaced."

Her hand was still stroking the plant.

"What could you do, with that little green ball?" She asked. "What could this little plant accomplish?"

"I could probably make your desk float for a few minutes," Donald answered. "Or I could kill someone. Uses are unlimited, it's the application that trips you up."

She finally stepped away from the plant, sitting back at her desk.

“I would ask why you never mentioned this before,” she said as she sat, “But I think I can guess. You’re not one to overshare.”

“Never have been, and Hooter made it clear anything he knew, he would use. Can’t say it made me fond of SHUSH knowing anything they didn't absolutely have to,” Donald said, and he sat down across from her.

“Ah, Hooter,” she replied, “I wonder how many issues we have now that come from him.”

Donald shrugged. He hadn’t known too many other agents besides Kay K on a personal level, so if there was large-scale resentment of Hooter’s methods, he had no way of knowing.

“So, if we invite, ah, Green Bat back to explain this in more detail to anyone that we think needs to know, would he come?”

Donald slumped in his seat, letting out a long breath.

“He would, when he has the time to come in,” Donald said. “If he can’t, I do know a few other people. But he’s the best teacher out of the lot of them.” José would come in in a heartbeat under the circumstances; he probably would just for the fun of dressing up and chatting with new people.

“You didn’t think I would agree,” Ravenson noted, leaning forward in

her seat. Donald let out a humorless laugh.

“Absolute power and all that,” he replied. “Most magic users are limited in how much power they can take by how much they can handle; a machine filling a row of batteries doesn’t have the same kind of limits. If it worked, they could accidentally drain the sun.”

He had the dubious pleasure of watching the blood drain from Ravenson’s face. She turned and rapidly typed out an email, expression grim.

“Thank you,” she said, when she was done typing, “for trusting me.”

“Thank you for the same,” he replied, “and for being trustworthy.”

She smiled at him, just a small smile, and turned to face him directly.

“So, may I ask you questions?” She asked, and outright grinned when he nodded.

After spending his afternoon talking about the more fun aspects of magic, Donald felt lighter, even if he hadn’t gotten much done. He couldn’t tell her too much about his training (since what little there had been largely in other dimensions), but she mostly wanted to ask about what magic felt like, what kinds of creatures he’d met, how wands worked. She seemed younger as they talked, less composed.

She also reminded him of someone, but he couldn’t place who. Her

face wasn't remotely familiar, but something about the sparkle in her eyes pinged in his memory.

330 emailed him to confirm he was staying late to work with R & D if they weren't leaving on mission; Donald didn't have any reasonable options for next steps. The other teams had searched any FOWL bases he'd tagged and found nothing of note, they had no leads on where the Blot might be sourcing his technology or who he was working with to build his weapons, and they had no clear way to test them just yet.

Gizmoduck had sent PK a message asking to meet before the end of the day, so he left early and went to Ducklair Tower.

Meeting with Gizmo as PK so soon after meeting him as Double Duck was a bit of a process; Gizmo had picked up on his identity, but he still needed to focus on what PK was supposed to know and how he approached things. Maintaining different identities was more than changing clothes; each persona had different methods, characteristics, knowledge. It wasn't that Donald was putting on an act, it was just that he focused on different things in each role. Something he needed to maintain if only to keep his identities separate, even if the person he was meeting happened to know they were not.

PK was always an escape, in a way, free from a lot of rules Donald held himself to. He could be annoying and smug about it. Double Duck was charming, confident and competent. He got to enjoy being in charge and not being questioned, not the way Donald would be. It was like the confidence he'd found in the Navy, but supercharged. Being with the Cabs was less a persona and more feeling like he could just relax, fighting warlocks or not. It was the people he was with, not the role he was filling.

Not that he had really done it on purpose; this was the first time he'd really had to maintain all of them at once. Before he'd let each role take on the things that he felt like he couldn't *do* as Donald.

Gizmoduck arrived just as Donald pulled on his mask, rubbing his eyes under the visor. He didn't wait on ceremony, just pulled to a stop, rocking back and forth like he'd thrown on brakes.

"Do you know who I am? Under the mask, I mean," Gizmo asked, tugging at the edges of his visor. Donald blinked at him, then shrugged as casually as he could.

"I have a hunch," he said carefully, and Gizmoduck nodded tiredly.

"I think most people know my identity," he admitted, wrapping his arms around his chest. "Except Darkwing, maybe, cause he does *not* like Gizmoduck, but he seems to like me well enough."

He fell silent for a long moment, before the armor fell away to the floor with a startling clang. Donald jumped back, closing his eyes.

"You can look, PK. I want you to know my name," Gizmoduck insisted. Donald frowned.

"Are you sure?"

A laugh.

"Like I said, a lot of people already know. Launchpad even helped me get started," he said. Donald chuckled, Launchpad seemed to have that effect on people. He opened his eyes.

Fenton grinned tiredly at him. No surprises.

“Was your hunch right?” He asked, slipping into one of the chairs. Donald nodded.

“Only so many people Gyro Gearloose would trust with one of his inventions,” Donald pointed out quietly. Fenton was pretty casual about his identity, but Donald felt the gravity of his trust regardless. No matter that several people had found out about his identity, Fenton had trusted him enough to *tell* him.

Could Donald say he trusted him that much?

His fingers tugged at the edge of his mask.

Fenton already knew him as a spy.

He heard a sharp breath.

“No no, you don’t have to!” Fenton insisted, waving his hands. “Please don’t!”

Donald let his hands fall down with a quiet sigh. Not that it really mattered, Fenton *had* seen him without it. The voice changer would have been the more revealing part anyway; Double Duck and PK both utilized one, and without having Donald in the mix of names it wouldn't be clear why it was necessary.

“Why did you want to tell me your identity?” He asked.

Fenton grinned awkwardly.

“So that person I need help getting out of her organization? Her name is Gandra Dee,” he explained, “She’s my girlfriend.”

Of course she was. Donald couldn’t help but chuckle.

“She’s involved with FOWL.”

Ah phooey.

We can't call this Tron for legal reasons

“FOWL.” Donald repeated, more to himself than Fenton. “Of course it’s FOWL.”

FOWL being behind the nanobots made too much sense; they were the one organization that SHUSH had struggled to take out time and time again, and they were in the middle of a resurgence. But did that mean that they were involved with the Blot, or was the Spain connection just a coincidence? The weaponry they’d found there was clearly from the Blot’s technology…

“She really wants to leave, but they’re monitoring her all the time, we’ve had enough trouble communicating even before SHUSH found the bugs…”

“Did you know about them before?” Donald asked. He had to. He appreciated that Fenton was caught in a difficult situation, but if any agents had been hurt because of the nanobots-

“No! No, she doesn’t tell me much of anything. And it was only recently that she wanted to get out, I mean, it wasn’t that she wanted to do *bad* things, I promise, Gandra means well, but she has issues with big businesses controlling scientific discovery and-”

Donald waved a hand. Fenton stopped.

“SHUSH is going to ask her about it,” he warned Fenton, “About what she did for FOWL. They’re not going to be *nice* about it, Fenton, no matter that she defected. She was still part of what is essentially a terrorist organization. That could mean prison time, or it could mean some kind of parole. I can’t make promises.”

Fenton nodded, face drawing into sharp lines.

“I know. She knows too. But she can’t stay there, she’s not- she wants to do *good,* not what FOWL is up to.”

His face was determined. If it was him, Donald would have no worries at all. But this was about another person, one that, last Donald had heard, had been in league with Mark Beaks. Huey had been devastated that his date had been ruined by corporate espionage. Webby had thought the idea of having a nemesis was exciting.

But he trusted Fenton.

“OK. Then let’s figure out how to get her out.”

Fenton didn’t slump, exactly, but he did relax a bit.

“We have a way of communicating,” he revealed, “But she’s out of contact for a while. Nothing you need to worry about!” He added, at Donald’s expression, “They’ve got her working on getting a new batch of nanobots made, since SHUSH found the old ones. She has to put on a good front for a bit.”

Well, at least they had a warning about a new kind of nanobot incoming, that was something. But they couldn’t do much without Gandra’s input; apparently she hadn’t told Fenton much of what she was doing.

“So, you’re sure you can reach her securely?”

“Oh, I’m positive! We created a virtual world, it’s entirely secure,” he replied, some excitement leeching back into his eyes. “We started it as a way of testing out scientific theories in a safe environment, you know, to limit collateral damage, but it became a great way of keeping in touch.”

“Right. FOWL isn’t great for long-distance relationships, I bet,” Donald muttered. Fenton let out a rueful laugh.

“Yeah, that- that was when she started to talk about getting out. When they said she had to stop talking to anyone else,” he explained. “She wanted to do good things, and thought FOWL would give her the resources to do what she wanted without rules or regulations. Complete freedom, you know?”

“But with that came expectations on what she would do with that freedom?”

“Yeah. They wanted certain things, nothing too crazy at first, and she figured sure, they were sponsoring her, it was only fair. But then they started asking for more and more, and eventually they weren’t asking anymore.”

Fenton sighed, rubbing his face. Poor guy, he looked exhausted.

“Oh, I wanted to ask you about something that Darkwing mentioned,” Fenton said a few minutes later, gathering himself. Donald blinked; Darkwing and Gizmo didn’t exactly get along, he couldn’t imagine what a casual conversation between the two would look like.

“He, well, kinda threatened me?” He said, rubbing a hand on the back

of his neck.

“He *what?* ”

“It wasn’t bad! He just said to stop asking questions about this place!” Fenton explained, gesturing around. “Said it wasn’t something he could tell me, just that I should stop asking. Which… I am completely ignoring right now, but…”

He glanced at the computer. Specifically, Uno’s system. It was dark.

Same as it had been for the last two decades. Give or take.

Donald looked back at Fenton.

“But?” He snapped. Fenton startled and met his eyes.

“Ah, sorry! I just- um.” But he didn’t seem to know how to finish the sentence. Donald didn’t find himself inclined to help. Heat rolled down his spine in a lazy crawl. His hands curled in and out by his sides.

“I just…”

His beak curled up.

“I think I can fix it!” Fenton exclaimed. Donald’s fragile control snapped.

“He isn’t it an *it,”* Donald snarled, nails biting into his palms. “His name is *Uno.* ”

How dare he, how *dare he,* Uno was more than a computer, he was a person, how dare Fenton, *how could Everett do this to him, he was your son-!*

“Uno?”

Donald gasped sharply, Fenton’s voice a wave of freezing water on his burning temper. He took a breath. Two.

“Uno was- he’s an AI. This is his system. He was deactivated by his creator,” Donald explained softly, looking at the orb. The betrayal was a throbbing wound; he could only imagine how Uno had felt. Would feel, when he woke back up.

He would wake up.

“Oh… oh! This was- Oh, that makes- I’m sorry,” Fenton said gently, hesitantly setting his hand on Donald’s shoulder. Donald shuddered, but didn’t shove him off.

Fenton’s words sounded like they were underwater, or maybe just Donald was, and he only made out a few words as he clawed back his temper. He couldn’t lose it in here; what if he broke Uno’s orb?

“I think… my new visor… connect… it could… maybe? I…”

Donald shook his head, trying to clear the noise and focus.

"You think you can connect to Uno's system…?" He asked hesitantly. It felt like using a corpse as a dance partner to him. Fenton nodded, gaining speed as he got more excited for his idea.

"Yes! I mean, he's an AI, so if he's still there he would be somewhere in the system. Plugging in would give us a way to see around, and maybe reach out to him directly."

This felt weirdly familiar, for some reason.

"You think you could wake him up?" Donald asked, staring at the dark orb. Fenton's reflection was warped inside it, a lumpy brown figure that gestured vaguely.

"I think there's a chance. I would need to bring the equipment here, run a few tests to make sure I can connect in without triggering a firewall…" Fenton rambled. Donald half-listened, tuning out the more technical aspects out of habit.

He could wake up Uno. *He could wake up Uno.*

Was this the right method? Was it the correct time? Would Lyla be able to stop them in time if it *wasn't?*

Donald hated this. He hated to hesitate, hated that every moment could be one too many, that every moment he waited might be too far, and Uno could be lost forever. But if he moved too soon, would he

doom the future? Would Odin be erased? Lyla?

Time travel was not what it was cracked up to be. He wished he didn't know what he knew.

If it was a choice between being too soon and being too *late,* what did he prefer?

"How long would it take you to get set up?" He asked, staring at the orb.

Fenton spent some time going over the hardware, looking for how to connect into the system and what he would need to use his current VR setup, narrating as he did while Donald watched the doors intently. If Lyla or someone from the future was going to stop them, they would come now, not the day of, right?

Or would that create some kind of timeline split, and he would never know if he had messed up until it was far too late, and wow Donald really hated time travel.

The edge of the desk bent under his hands. Then, it was no longer attached to the rest of the desk.

"Er, PK?"

Donald set the hunk of metal carefully down on the desk. Uno would be annoyed with him.

“Just- let me know when we have a good time,” he said quietly, “I don’t completely understand the technical side of it, but I trust you.”

Fenton’s eyes went wide, and his face went grim. He nodded once.

“I won’t let you down. Either of you.”

The kids had been more than happy to get their own ride out to their favorite ice cream parlor on the pier ‘so you can meet us there!’ Which turned out to be an excuse to invite Lena and Violet along, with Launchpad as their afternoon chauffeur.

“I hope you do not mind us joining you,” Violet said when he saw them all, hands clasped behind her back. Donald snorted a laugh, shaking his head.

“The more the merrier!” He said with a grin. It was easier to be calm and cheerful when faced with so many excited kids in an ice cream parlor. The Blot could wait.

Uno might be back soon!

It was a good day.

Launchpad grinned at him over his Darkwing cone; apparently it was a new novelty flavor the shop was trying out. Donald personally didn't think black ice cream looked that appetizing, but LP seemed happy with it.

“Hey DD! Glad we all get to hang out!” He said enthusiastically, nearly smacking Donald in the face with the cone. “Oops, sorry!”

Donald waved him off, looking at his boys. They all looked varying levels of smug, which he supposed was deserved. They had done the impossible, in his opinion; gotten Scrooge to apologize. He gathered the three of them close.

“Thanks kids,” he said, low, and reached out to drag Webby in as well. She giggled, eyes bright. Unlike the boys, she looked more… conflicted. Scrooge had always been her hero; confronting him about anything had to be hard for her.

He wished it hadn’t had to happen. He wished it hadn’t been for his sake.

“Aw Unca Donald, you’re being embarrassing!” Louie complained, making zero effort to leave his embrace, while Dewey wiggled around. It wasn’t an escape-type wiggle, more of an excited one, but Donald let them go anyway so he could see their faces.

Huey looked victorious.

“He didn’t even last a week!” Huey explained with a grin. Louie snorted.

“Probably wouldn’t have lasted that long, if Unca Donald had been in town the whole time,” he retorted. “He was ready to take us to Big Rock Candy Mountain again just to get me to break.”

“Again?” Donald asked, blinking. Louie’s face twitched.

“Ah, everyone went while I was grounded a while back,” he said evasively, “So Uncle Scrooge figured I’d be happy to go back.”

Why would they go on an adventure while one of the boys was grounded? And why to the one place Louie *would* want to go?

“He even offered to let us pick!” Dewey exclaimed, waving wildly. Distractingly.

“Yeah, and he *never* lets us do that!” Huey added.

“Wait, never? Huh,” Donald said, surprised. He and Della had helped plan when they’d started going on adventures, but he supposed they’d been a bit older at the time.

“Uh huh, and he said we could go looking for *anything.* Cursed treasure!” Dewey declared.

“Historical importance!” Webby insisted. Lena, sitting quietly nearby, snorted a laugh.

“Only you, Pink, would want to find history stuff instead of magic stuff,” she declared, while Huey and Violet gave her shocked looks.

“History stuff is awesome! I want to go to Paris and see the catacombs! I wanna touch a skull,” Webby told her seriously.

There was no way she hadn't seen a skull before. Was there something special about a Parisian catacomb skull for her?

"I would greatly enjoy seeing a cursed artifact or some new historical discovery, personally," Violet added. Louie scoffed.

"Clearly treasure is better than both of those things. We can't actually *use* the cursed stuff we find for anything, and Unca Donald says the history stuff should be donated," he complained. Violet turned to give Donald an intrigued look.

"You donate the artifacts you find?" She asked with interest.

"If we can," he replied casually. "Not everything is historically valuable." And the valuable things tended to be claimed by Scrooge as his share.

Violet nodded, looking thoughtful. Donald couldn't say he knew her incredibly well, and could only guess what she was thinking.

"So, what are you gonna pick then?" Lena asked, drawing all eyes. Donald took the opportunity to take a large bite of his rocky road. And instantly regretted it, brain freeze grabbing his skull in an icy grip. He squawked, which the kids all ignored, while Launchpad gave him a sympathetic pat on the arm.

"What do you mean?" Huey asked, peering at Lena with a confused expression. She rolled her eyes.

"For your adventure? It's not like Uncle S *said* it was a bribe for forgiving him, so the offer is still open. What *are* you all going to do?"

The four of them looked at each other blankly. It was painfully obvious it hadn't occurred to any of them that they *could* cash that offer in once they got Scrooge to break. Donald had to confess, rubbing his head, he probably would have never thought of it either.

"Huh. We *could* go to Big Rock Candy Mountain!" Louie said, gaining some enthusiasm as he spoke.

"Or find the lost crown of the witch king of Angmar!" Webby countered, both hands clasped on the edge of the table as though she was holding herself back from leaving right that second.

"What about exploring the ruins of-" Huey started.

"Wait, I've got it!"

Donald sighed, leaning back as the debate raged. Lena shifted towards him with a slight wince.

"Sorry I asked?" She muttered, but she looked more shy than regretful. She still seemed to struggle with inserting herself into the group at large, from what Donald could see. One on one, she was fine, or when things were quieter she was comfortable, but when his four kids got going, she drew back a bit.

Five kids, in this case; Violet was eagerly debating the merits of using the free adventure for a more dangerous trip versus a historical one with Huey and Webby both, while Louie and Dewey interjected their own ideas.

“Best you said it now,” Donald said back to Lena, “Imagine how they would feel if they missed the opportunity.”

Lena giggled. She practically glowed with happiness, lately, freed from Magica’s shadow.

Sometimes she literally glowed. Donald got the strong feeling of love and affection she felt, for Webby and for Violet and the boys, all different shades of teal and aqua blue, and felt a smile tug onto his face.

Launchpad shifted in his seat; Donald glanced over, to see the man’s face was surprisingly serious.

“So,” he said, drawing everyone’s attention at his tone.

“So,” he continued. “How are José and Panchito?” He asked, and the table drained of tension like a leaky balloon. Donald chuckled.

“Good. José was over yesterday, had an early flight out of Duckburg. Panchito got a job playing for a local restaurant, he’s pretty excited about it.” Donald replied. Dewey’s eyes narrowed at him.

“Wait, José was here yesterday?” He asked suspiciously.

“Only for sleeping; like I said, he had an early flight, and I live closer,” Donald answered. Dewey still looked displeased, but he nodded.

“You’re supposed to have everyone over for dinner,” he reminded

Donald, like he could have forgotten.

He could have, for sure, so the reminder was actually pretty reasonable.

“Organizing three schedules isn’t easy,” he said, “But unless something else comes up we’re hoping for this weekend. Do you boys have any requests?”

“Lasagna,” Huey answered before either of his brothers could speak. They all turned to look at him, and he flushed.

“What?” He protested. “Unca Donald never has time to make it!”

He didn’t, he really didn’t, but he could make time for this. He wanted the night to go well.

Please let it go well.

“I can do that,” he promised. Lasagna. He could go shopping in a day or two to get everything, maybe they could make it together and have an afternoon.

“So can I ask about all of that? You went from being single to dating two different guys in like a weekend,” Lena said casually, peering at him with mild interest.

The boys froze, avoiding looking at each other, while Webby went pale and grabbed Lena's shoulder to hiss in her ear. She listened to the

hushed whispers before shaking her head and leaning away.

"No, yeah, I know Scrooge had a whole meltdown and everything, I got that part. But how do you have *two* boyfriends? Like, how does that even work?"

"Lena, are you asking about polyamory?" Donald asked, tilting his head. Lena shrugged, face twisting with displeasure.

"I guess, yeah?" She shrugged, pursing her beak. Her hands gripped a plastic spoon until it bent in half. Violet peered at her with confusion, reaching out like she wanted to hold Lena's hand, but stopped short.

"Well, we met in college," he started, since he wasn't entirely sure what Lena was looking for, "José and Panchito actually started dating first, but we all lived together, so we spent a lot of time together. When I realized my feelings, it was…" he hesitated, trying to decide how much he should say here.

"We had to talk about it eventually," he finally landed on, which wasn't the most accurate way of explaining things. "It took some discussion, finding everyone's boundaries and how everyone felt. It's not easy, balancing three people. Worth it though," he added, smiling.

"Wait, did you ask them out as a couple?" Huey asked, squinting at him. "Or did they ask you?" Donald shrugged.

"Both at once?" He said, considering. "They approached me, asked if we could talk about something, and I figured I'd take the opportunity to get things out in the open. So that turned out well."

Webby sighed dreamily, leaning onto one hand.

Launchpad sighed, doing the same. They both had stars in their eyes.

“That’s so romantic! You were all so in sync that you did it at the same time! Ooh, what if you proposed, and they both wanted to propose-!” And Webby was off. Donald had to laugh, and wondered if she was still planning some kind of beach warming, or if that had been forgotten in the wave of other distractions.

“I don’t think any of us are ready to get married, Webby,” he said, even though he doubted she would hear him. “We just started dating again a week ago, it’s a bit early to think about that.”

Well, think about it seriously, anyway. Fantasize about, that was a different story.

“And nobody gets jealous about the other two spending time together without them?” Lena asked. Donald got the impression she wasn’t asking about him and his partners anymore. He shook his head with a smile.

“That’s one of those conversations we had when we started dating,” he explained gently. “Lots of those conversations, checking that everyone is still good, that nothing has changed.”

Lena made a face at that.

“Double Dee’s right, you gotta communicate in your relationships. Me and Drake and Gosalyn talk all the time,” Launchpad added, nodding vehemently. Donald gave him a fond look, then glanced back at the

kids. Lena looked put out, like she had hoped they would have different answers, while Webby and Violet were eyeing each other with concern. The boys looked utterly lost.

"Are we still talking about your boyfriends?" Huey asked after a moment, and Lena startled and waved her hands around, splattering everything with melted chocolate ice cream.

"Yup, yup! Just that, nothing to do with anyone at this table!"

"Wait, do you *like* someon-" Dewey started.

"Communication is important for any relationship, not just romances," Donald cut him off. "You boys have to talk about things too, if something is bothering you."

"Not that I was talking about anyone!" Lena insisted.

"Right! Um, Dewey, want to- see how many scoops we can get on a single cone?!" Webby interrupted, banging her fist on the table, eyes wild.

"You're trying to distract me, and it. Is. Working!" Dewey declared, and he bolted for the counter. Webby darted after him. Lena slumped until she was face-down on the table.

"Bet five bucks on Webby winning," Louie declared immediately. Huey snorted a laugh, while Violet considered them all with a thoughtful hum.

“Dewford tends to have an edge in food-based competitions. I’ll take that bet,” she replied; they shook on it.

Donald patted Lena on the shoulder. She looked at him from under her bangs, a nasty glare toned down by how red her face clearly was. He gave her a hopefully encouraging grin.

“Can you just kill me?” She asked lowly, almost drowned out by cheerful shouting from the counter as the ice cream cones grew. Donald shook his head.

“Sorry, no can do kiddo,” he said, and her head thunked back to the table. “You’ll survive, don’t worry.”

“Yeah,” she grumbled, finally pulling her head up to rest it on her folded arms. “But at what cost?”

Teenagers, Donald thought with a rueful chuckle. Drama queens, the lot of them.

Family Dinner

Okay. Pasta was cooking. Sauce was also cooking. He needed to start on the cheeses, but he couldn't seem to focus.

The boys were out on the beach. José would be there soon, he was coming straight from a flight. Panchito had tried to get there early, but traffic had caught him on the Duckburg Bay Bridge. He had called them from the standstill, and said he would leave his taxi and run if he had to. He'd then heard a song he loved on the radio and ended the call with a burst of singing.

Gladstone had been around earlier, apparently drawn in by Donald cooking, but he'd left when Donald had explained the situation, giving a cheerful wave.

"Good luck!"

Which, coming from Gladstone, could either be a great blessing or a curse, it really depended.

Donald focused on assembling the lasagna, which Dewey insisted on describing as noodle cake. It was a favorite of Huey's, the other boys were more neutral towards it. He was surprised that they hadn't fought him on the choice, honestly, if only for the principal of it; maybe they were as nervous as he was.

"Unca Donald! Can I help make dinner?" Louie's voice echoed through the small boat as the door slammed open.

"Louie! Watch the wall!"

“Oops, sorry,” he said, strolling into the room with his hands in his pockets. His shoulders were tense.

“Of course you can help. I’m just about to start assembling,” Donald said cautiously. Louie nodded. He washed his hands in silence.

Donald laid out the prepared ingredients. They worked quickly, and without speaking. Donald eyed his nephew with concern, but said nothing. Louie didn’t like to be dragged into speaking, preferred to come at it at his own pace.

“Did you guys really just break up because they had to move?” Louie finally asked, and Donald nearly dropped the tray he was sliding into the oven.

“Yes,” he replied, straightening with a groan. “It’s easier now to keep in touch, but back then long distance was *expensive!”* Donald grinned at his nephew, but Louie continued to frown.

“But now they’re really close,” he grumbled.

“And we decided to try dating again,” Donald prompted, when Louie fell silent. Louie huffed a breath, and crossed his arms.

“Are you going to move again?” He finally asked, tugging at the sleeves of his shirt. “Or- are they gonna move *here?* In the houseboat?”

Donald sighed, and stepped closer.

“Maybe someday, I’ll ask them,” he said slowly, crouching to put his hand on Louie’s shoulder. He was tense, almost shaking. “But not without talking it over as a family. I know you all live in the Manor, but this is still your home, I’m not making decisions like that without talking it over.”

“And if a literal mansion wasn’t enough to make me give up this old boat,” he added, when he finally saw Louie’s red-rimmed eyes peer from behind his bangs, “what makes you think the cabana is?”

Louie smiled wetly, then puffed out a scoff.

“We haven’t even seen this so-called cabana,” he muttered, play-scowling. “Maybe it’s nicer than the boat.”

“Trust me, it’s not,” Donald said clearly. “It was fun when we were in college, but I like the boat.”

Louie allowed Donald to hug him for a moment before he started to squirm, and they went back to prepping dinner.

“So…” Louie asked, in a much lighter tone. “Wanna talk about being in the Navy?”

Donald paused, frowning.

“You’re usually more subtle than that,” he observed, carefully cutting vegetables for a salad. Louie shrugged.

“You don’t have to give me names of people or anything, I just want to hear more about when you were in the Navy is all.”

Names…? Right, their name game. At some point he would probably have to find out what they had discovered. The fact that it had gone on *this* long was a bit concerning; surely they should have gotten bored by now?

“I’m pretty sure I’m not allowed to give hints unless everyone is here,” Donald pointed out, smirking at Louie’s groan.

“Aw come on, at least tell me what ship you served on? Huey’s been bragging he’s gonna find it first!”

A shout from outside interrupted their debate. A very familiar one. Donald couldn’t help but grin. Louie looked anxious again, hands fiddling in his pockets.

“Come on, you’ve met them before,” Donald pointed out, leading the way onto the decks. Louie shook his head.

“It’s kinda different this time,” he pointed out, and, well, Donald was antsy himself, so he couldn’t exactly disagree. He gave Louie an encouraging look, then opened the door and exited into bright sunlight.

“Unca Donald! Panchito is here!” Dewey shouted from the beach, waving frantically as he chased the red rooster. Panchito was flushed, grinning wildly, darting over every little thing on the beach with the excitement of a child on Christmas.

“Donal’! I made it before José! Your sobrinos are giving me a tour!” He shouted, not even out of breath. Donald glanced around, but no, there was no car.

“You ran from the bridge,” he said, not even a question, and from behind him, Louie choked a surprised laugh.

“I ran from the bridge! But I did pay my taxi driver his full fee, so there is no trouble!” Panchito shouted cheerfully, doing a running leap over one of the beach chairs to skid to a stop at the base of the pier. He leaned against the post and adjusted his hat, wide smile still on his face, and waved again.

Donald helplessly waved back.

“Hello again Louie! It is nice to see you again!” He said, in a slightly calmer voice, peering at where Donald could feel small hands gripping the back of his shirt. The grip tightened, briefly, before disappearing, and Louie slipped to his side.

“Sup?” He asked, too casual, and leaned against the railing.

“Louie! Panchito ran here all the way from the bay!” Dewey hollered as he reached them. From a ways away, Huey was walking towards them. Clearly he’d made no effort to keep up with Panchito’s rapid exploration of the beach.

“I heard,” Louie replied. Donald couldn’t see his expression from where he stood, but he would bet it was ‘grudgingly impressed.’

“So! I have not yet seen everything! Can we continue our little tour?” Panchito asked, straightening and gesturing wildly around the beach. Donald’s eyes followed the hands; there really wasn’t much on the beach yet. A few chairs and an umbrella, usually occupied by his cousin. A nearly finished bungalow, with some spaces around the perimeter tentatively marked out for garden beds. A hammock hanging in the trees, and a string of lights leading up to the hill path, and the Manor beyond.

But Louie had perked up, just a bit, and shifted forward.

“Sure,” he replied, hands in his pockets again. “Might as well.”

He didn’t move forward until Donald did, mirroring his steps. Donald met Panchito’s eyes; under the brim of the hat, his face was nervous, and they darted to each boy in a rapid cycle before meeting Donald’s again.

Donald gave him a brief kiss on the cheek, which elicited three loud groans, and then stepped back with an exaggerated grimace.

“You’re showering before dinner,” he ordered, and Panchito’s tension melted with a pout.

“Ah, Donal’...”

Donald raised a brow. Panchito’s eyes widened, lower beak coming out further.

“I raised three kids, that look doesn’t work on me,” he said mildly, and Panchito’s face shifted into an easy grin, leaning back to rock on

his heels.

“Ai, you did! And what charming lads you have raised,” Panchito crowed, “Now come! Show me your new beach. Then yes, I will wash off.”

As they walked, Dewey bounced around them, eagerly pointing to trees and rocks and proclaiming which ones he could do a flip over, which he was already able to climb, what ones he and Webby wanted to build a tree fort/look out tower in. Panchito nodded along, examining each closely.

“Will you have cannons in your lookout tower fort?” He asked, innocently. Too innocently. Donald scowled, kicking at his heel with a hiss to *shut up!*, while Dewey tried his own puppy eyes. Donald was unmoved.

“We are *not,”* he stressed, “putting *cannons* in a *flammable tree fort!”*

“But how will they defend against pirates?” Panchito asked, while Dewy nodded seriously. Donald shook his head.

“No cannons,” he repeated. Dewey pouted. Panchito narrowed his eyes at Donald, a playful smirk crossing his face.

“You could mount them on the ground,” he pointed out, “Then there is no risk of fire in the fort!”

“No.”

“Aw, but-”

“Nope!”

“Unca Donald-”

“You cannot leave your sobrinos unarmed! What about a different weapon?”

“I will give you sword lessons, but you are not getting a cannon,” Donald finally sighed, and Dewey whooped, throwing himself into a backflip he had to have learned from Webby before launching himself at Donald’s midsection.

“Thankyouthankyou thank you!”

Donald rolled his eyes, and gave Panchito a *look.* Panchito shrugged.

“I said nothing about swords, that is on you,” he said cheerfully, before his face melted into shock when Dewey launched himself at Panchito, leaving Donald wavering at the rapid movement.

“Thanks Panchito!”

“Ah- it was nothing?” He tried, looking at Donald for guidance, rubbing the back of Dewey’s ruffled feathers with a baffled expression. “I didn’t do a thing.”

“He’s gonna teach me how to use a sword!” Dewey insisted, which probably made sense in his head as a response, and darted away to scoop up a stick to fence at his brothers.

“What Dewey means is, thanks for suggesting an alternative that Unca Donald was okay with,” Huey translated. Panchito glanced at Donald again, who sighed, and shrugged. Even he didn't understand their leaps of logic sometimes.

In all honesty he should have been teaching the boys from the moment they moved back to the Manor. Maybe it was wishful thinking, like if he didn’t teach them how to use weapons they would never need them. But that was ridiculous, and between the two options, a sword was clearly more useful than a cannon.

“Wait, does that mean we all can learn swordplay?” Huey asked, tilting his head. Donald considered him, then Louie, who was carefully not making eye contact, watching Dewey instead.

“If you want to,” Donald finally replied. “If you want to use a different weapon I can try, or we can find you a teacher.” Bentina would probably be able to do anything he couldn’t. She might be the better option in general, really, but… Donald wanted to do it.

“What about my khopesh?” Louie finally asked, turning to look at Donald again. He’d used the weapon a few times, Donald recalled, but never with any serious training behind it, banking on surprise to keep his attackers at bay.

“I can manage that,” Donald replied. He’d trained with a few similar blades under King Arthur, he could cover some basics at least. He turned to Huey, who looked pensive.

“I mean, a sword would be useful on our adventures, and there’s a fencing badge I could work on,” he said hesitantly. Donald made a face.

“Fencing isn’t the same thing as swordplay, the weight is different,” he said, and all three boys looked at him. “I can do a bit of fencing, but it’s been a while.”

“What about a crossbow?” Huey asked, eyes sharp. Donald paused, tilting his head. Dewey made an inquiring sound, dropping his stick.

“It would be useful to know a ranged weapon!” Huey insisted, tugging at the hem of his shirt.

“Yeah, but what if someone gets in close?”

“ *Then* you use the sword,” Panchito cut in, and he grinned when they all looked at him instead. “Myself, I have used a whip and a spear! This way I am prepared for enemies near and far!”

“Wait,” Dewey protested, “what are your gun holsters for if you use a *whip?”*

“I’m more curious about the spear, actually,” Louie said. Panchito laughed.

“Ah, yes, I do often carry pistols! But, when I am working, or around children, I prefer not to carry them,” he explained, gesturing towards the holsters; his cell phone stuck out of one.

“And, well, dating Donal’, one must be prepared! Your family always seems to be finding trouble,” Panchito continued. His hand casually tapped at his chest, where Donald knew the Caballero gem was hidden under his chest feathers. He felt a corresponding pulse of sunny-warmth from his own gem, and shook his head.

“I wasn’t the one that invited everyone to a carnivorous plant festival, that was José,” he pointed out. Panchito snapped, nodding.

“That is true!”

“So, what, Unca Donald is danger prone, so you learned how to use a spear?” Huey asked. “That seems excessive.”

“Eh, it was also fun,” Panchito said with a shrug.

“Weird definition of fun,” Louie muttered.

“Panchito jumped out of an airplane without a parachute, for the rush.” Donald retorted. “Twice.”

José pulled in as Donald spoke, so only Louie heard him over the crunch of the tires. He stared, blinking at Panchito’s rapidly retreating back, then back at Donald incredulously.

“Why,” he whispered in horror, while Donald laughed and ran to greet José.

José was still in his uniform, which was getting incredibly wrinkled

under Panchito's tight, twirling hug. Dewey and Huey were standing a few feet away, watching with some amusement. José was calmly talking about his drive as Donald got close, not reacting to his spinning besides clinging to Panchito's shoulders.

"Ah, Donald! I was just explaining the newest developments at work!" He said cheerfully, as Panchito spun to a stop. "You see Jennifer, who is another flight attendant, has told me all about our pilot Francis and his, ah, extra-curriculars with Alexa…"

As he talked, he plopped to the ground. Donald tugged him into a tight hug, brief, and kissed his cheek. No groans this time, just exasperated expressions.

Panchito insisted on José getting the full tour of the beach, which Dewey was more than happy to lead again. Donald stepped back into the houseboat to check on dinner. He felt calmer now, with everyone all in one place.

Until he got into the kitchen anyway, and found that smoke was rising out of the oven.

After a few minutes of panicked running around, Donald was able to rescue dinner and put out the fire caused by a chunk of baking paper that had been stuck to the lasagna pan. Thankfully, the food was fine, so he dragged a folding table out onto the deck of the boat to eat while the kitchen air out.

"Ah, had a bit of a fire?" Panchito called, peering into the kitchen from the doorway while Donald gathered dishes. Donald glanced up with a sheepish scowl.

“I was distracted!” He defended himself, but he was laughing as he did. Panchito joined him, scooping up the stack of plates and darting out of the room to bring them outside. Donald followed with cups and a pitcher of lemonade.

“We are eating out in the open air today!” Panchito called out, tossing plates onto the table wildly. Donald winced as they clanged, but nothing broke. He set the drinks down more gingerly.

“Was there a fire Unca Donald?” Huey asked, taking silverware to lay out. Donald sighed.

“Just some smoke, dinner is fine,” he replied. The boys giggled.

Dinner was loud. Panchito was always a cheerful dinner guest, chattering about whatever came to mind, songs he’d heard or was writing, people he’d seen on the drive/run to the beach. A dog with a fancy cane that had come into the restaurant he worked at, a group of students at New Quackmore he'd found playing an intense game of Uno at three in the morning in the quad. Dewey found him fascinating; he was leaning close, hanging on every word, tossing in his own ‘super awesome’ adventure stories in response to Panchito’s.

José was more sedate, tossing out small anecdotes and jokes when Panchito paused his stories. He was lounged in his chair, eating slowly, grinning whenever he caught Donald’s eye. José looked at home everywhere he was, but seeing him in between Donald and Huey was something to savor.

But he couldn’t help but be tense as they ate, wondering when the other shoe would drop. The boys were happily chattering away, but Donald knew his boys. There was an interrogation coming at some point, or threats, or some kind of scheme. They’d had a full week to plan something, after all.

There was a flash of something up the hill; Donald glanced up, but couldn't see anything. A camera? Webby with binoculars? Something less paranoid sounding, like a bird?

It was probably the last thing.

Well, no, it probably *was* Webby, but he could pretend.

"So… did you guys really move just to date Unca Donald again?" Louie asked casually. Panchito choked in the middle of a word, startled, and José jumped, nearly spitting out his bite of lasagna.

Donald sighed, letting his face fall into his hand.

"Ah! Well," Panchito stuttered, before recovering and leaning forward with a broad grin. "Of course we did! I have been missing Donal' and José since our parting many years ago, so when we got the chance to be together again, I could not say no!"

"Even if Donald had not been interested in rekindling our romance," José continued, making careful eye contact with each of the boys, then Donald, "we wanted to move back. I love Brasil, but I have missed Panchito, and Duckburg, and our other friends here. I have missed our companionship as well as our romance; moving to Duckburg was an opportunity to come back to both." So saying, he winked at Donald, while Panchito sighed dreamily and let his cheeks fall into his hands.

"But, you weren't leaving anything behind?" Huey asked, frowning. Panchito made a vague sound.

“My family has a farm in Mexico,” he replied, “but I can still travel to see them. And we call often! So I can still speak with them whenever I am missing my mamá or my tios.”

“Me, I am not close to most of my family,” José admitted. “My sister and my sobrinhos, I visit when I can; good that I work for an airline, yes? But besides them, my friends are here.”

“We always leave things behind when we make a change,” José continued carefully, “That is part of life. But I believe the things we have gained are worth what we have left behind.”

The table went silent for a long time. Panchito was still staring at José dreamily, while the boys didn’t make eye contact.

“Well! Uh, cool, that’s really good to hear. So, uh, what’s your favorite thing about Unca Donald?” Huey asked abruptly, dragging all eyes back to him. He went red underneath his feathers.

“His *passion!”*

“His heart.” José and Panchito answered at the same time, looking at each other with a grin, before looking back at Huey.

“I think I first fell in love with your tio when he got up early to make us all breakfast after a long, troublesome weekend,” José said cheerfully. “We were all tired, but there he was making pancakes, because he thought we needed a treat! Ah, it was very sweet, how could I not melt?”

Dewey's face contorted, like he was torn between disgust and agreement.

"I fell in love with his singing," Panchito chirped. Everyone turned to stare at him. Even Donald, blinking in confusion.

"Wak?"

"You sure you mean Unca *Donald's* singing? You didn't mistake it for something else?" Dewey asked, baffled.

"Like a blender?" Louie muttered, then winced as someone clearly kicked him under the table. "What? It's true!"

"Ah, yes, it is unique, but he always sings from the heart!" Panchito insisted. "Donal' sings when he is happy, and that makes me very happy! I could listen to him sing all day." He smiled at Donald as he spoke.

Donald found a sappy smile cross his beak in response. What else could he do?

"Alright, that's enough mushy stuff! Can you tell us some cool stories from college or something instead?" Dewey shouted, waving his arms in front of their faces. Donald looked at his nephew with a smug grin.

"You sure you don't want to hear what I love about José? Or Chito?" He asked teasingly. Huey looked interested, but Dewey let out a long groan and a violent shake of his head.

“Nerp! We’re good! Come on, you guys had to have, I don’t know, joined a frat? Had a date the same time as some important sports thing? Anything?”

“What is he talking about?” Panchito asked in a stage whisper. Donald snorted a laugh.

“Probably some movie, Dewey learns about the world via musicals,” he replied. “He still thinks that high school requires people to break out into song.”

“Wait, it doesn’t?!”

Just Desserts

Donald really didn't expect anything to change after Scrooge apologized to him. He was shocked to have received it, for sure, but once he'd let that settle in? He'd assumed everything would go back to normal. Scrooge would go back to ignoring his partners or grumbling about them, most likely away from the boys' ears this time, and that would be that.

Scrooge coming down to the beach after they'd had dinner, specifically to apologize to Panchito? That, that he had not expected.

Yet here he was, watching their conversation from the boat, wishing he had an excuse to get closer to eavesdrop. So were the boys and José; they were all leaning against the railing of the houseboat watching. Panchito was down on the beach where Scrooge had led him, arms crossed. He was nodding as Scrooge spoke, but his face was entirely hidden by his sombrero.

"Five bucks says Uncle Scrooge is trying to talk him into going on an adventure," Louie tossed out quietly. Donald shushed him.

"After the plant village thing? Nah, I bet he's trying to give a shovel talk," Dewey replied under his breath.

Scrooge glanced at the boat, and went still, scowling. Clearly they'd been spotted.

Not that they'd been making any attempt *not* to be seen, Donald thought with a smirk, and he waved cheerfully from where he was leaning. Panchito turned to look at them, and smiled widely, waving back. Scrooge had to step back to avoid being hit by Panchito's arm. He looked uncomfortable.

Then he looked downright panicked as Panchito snagged his sleeve and dragged him back towards the boat, barreling up the dock so fast Scrooge could only stumble along instead of tugging away. His eyes were wide and his free hand had slammed onto his head to hold his top hat in place.

Donald laughed, couldn't help it, and stepped aside to let them both on board. Panchito leapt up the gangplank and landed with a flourish; Scrooge, still being tugged along, kept his balance with a flail and a shout. The boys hid their laughter behind their hands; José toasted the pair with a tilt of his drink. Somehow he'd gotten back to his seat before they'd reached the boat, and had his chair tilted back in a casual lean.

"Donal'! Your tio wishes us to join you on an adventure!" Panchito announced brightly; Louie wordlessly held out a hand to Dewey. "Where should we go?"

"Oh, I don't know," Donald said thoughtfully, tilting his head back in thought. He tapped his chin slowly, playing it up; from the edge of his vision, he could see Scrooge squinting suspiciously at him.

"Maybe Bahia?" He finally said; José perked up, and Panchito's grin widened.

"What's in Bahia?" Huey asked curiously.

" *Where* is Bahia?" Dewey demanded. Scrooge's eyes narrowed further; could he even see?

"What? Don't tell me you've never been to Bahia?" José asked, falling

into song as he spoke, standing gracefully from his chair to peer at the boys in turn.

“No?” Huey answered, lost, while José laughed and continued along.

“When you go to Bahia, dear, you’ll never want to return!” He sang; Panchito reached out to grab his arm and they shifted into a samba.

Donald pulled his concertina out of his hat and played the starting notes; José sang along, while the boys started to giggle and Scrooge stared at them all. He looked so out of place that Donald almost felt bad.

Almost.

He started playing ‘Blame it on the Samba’ instead, laughing when Dewey sat up in recognition and leapt up to dance.

Then Donald heard a tinny accompaniment, and glanced over to see Louie had pulled up the recording on his phone with a grin.

Donald hopped up, swinging around the table to twirl around Dewey, still playing. He nudged Scrooge towards one of the empty chairs with a foot; the older duck went willingly, falling into a seat with a blank expression.

“What in blazes…” he muttered, but only to himself, so Donald continued along. Huey was tapping his foot against the floor, Dewey spun around him in an enthusiastically off-beat dance, José and Panchito shimmied down the gangplank to dance on the dock.

José and Panchito were always a treat to watch; José was graceful and bright, Panchito enthusiastic and vibrant. Donald only occasionally got the chance to just watch, so he made the most of it, keeping his eyes open even as his tail flicked in tune and the concertina sang under his hands.

"Is this… normal?" Scrooge asked, in a low tone, leaning towards Huey and Louie without taking his eyes off of them. Donald snorted a laugh and continued on, playing to match the music coming from Louie's phone. José dipped Panchito dramatically, and Dewey did a backflip over the railing to land on the dock.

"Eh, probably," Louie said dismissively.

"This is kinda our first time all hanging out together," Huey added. The song started to wind down, and Donald let his concertina trail off, while José and Panchito twirled to the last few notes. Dewey spun around them to dart back up to the boat.

"Unca Donald is usually humming something though," Huey added as Donald rejoined the table.

"And the accordion?" Scrooge demanded, gesturing at Donald. Donald glanced down at it, then back up without expression.

"It's a concertina," he replied mildly. Scrooge scoffed.

"That wasn't the point!" He insisted. José, rejoining the table, leaned his chair backwards again.

“Ah, you got that while we were in England, yes?” He asked casually. Donald nodded, tapping along the edges of the instrument.

“Yeah, on summer break, after we went to Stonehenge,” he replied, thinking of the goblins with a smile. They weren’t much for musical instruments, but apparently accordions and bagpipes were popular. For being loud and obnoxious if played badly (and the goblins only ever played them badly). He’d picked one up as his own souvenir for the sheer amusement, but had ended up enjoying playing so much that he’d kept at it after they left Goblin Town.

Scrooge made an irritated noise and gestured towards Donald’s head.

“I meant, where did you pull it from? It looked like you pulled it out of your hat!”

He had.

“I did.”

“ *How?”*

“Magic.”

Scrooge scowled, crossing his arms.

“Fine,” he grumbled, “keep your bloody secrets.”

And that was how Donald had kept so many secrets from his family.

Panchito, leaning against the rail behind José, caught Donald's eye and beamed.

"You guys went to Stonehenge?" Huey asked, drawing attention off of Donald's magic concertina. He took the opportunity to put it back in the pocket dimension that it lived in, by shoving it into his hat.

"Just for a visit, and it rained the whole day," Donald answered. Panchito laughed.

"Ah, but we made such good friends! We met some locals and spent the day with them instead," he told them all. José chuckled.

"Panchito, we spent half the day in jail," he pointed out. Donald winced as all eyes snapped back to him.

"You were in *jail?!"* Several voices asked at once.

"More of a drunk tank," Donald replied, thinking of the stench, "They let us all out a few hours later." Well, they had kinda broken out? They'd convinced Vomit to let them out, but he ended up being named King after that, so retroactively their release was legal. Legal-ish, anyway.

They boys were staring like they'd never seen him before in their lives. Scrooge looked like he couldn't decide between being disappointed or proud.

“But what did you *do?”* Dewey demanded, looking between the three of them rapidly. Donald glanced at his fellow Caballeros thoughtfully, trying to decide how to explain.

“Got in a fight with the wrong guy, I think,” he finally answered. José nodded.

“Or rather, our friend got in a fight with an old acquaintance, and we went along for the ride,” he added carefully.

“What friend?” Scrooge demanded darkly. The conflict on his face had been won by vengeance, surprisingly.

“Can’t say,” Donald replied lightly.

“Excuse me?” Scrooge asked, fists clenching. You’d think Donald had actually committed a crime, the way he looked. Donald rolled his eyes.

“It’s a secret,” he replied, and winked at the boys. “Besides, last thing she needs is you asking her about that whole thing, the guy was a serious creep.”

“But- but- you were in *jail* ,” Huey whispered, staring at the tabletop with wide eyes. Donald sighed, and reached out and ruffled Huey’s feathers under his cap.

“They basically tossed us in a cell for a night to cool off, kiddo. I wouldn’t recommend it, but nothing happened,” he explained, more gently, “It’s not even on our records anywhere.”

“You were in *jail!* ” Dewey shouted. “That’s officially the coolest thing about you!”

Donald spluttered in surprise, while José and Panchito laughed. Louie shook his head vehemently.

“I think it was the band, personally,” he said cheerfully, leaning forward to lean his chin in one hand.

“... shadow war,” Huey mumbled, still clearly processing, but unable to resist joining the debate. His brothers considered, each nodding thoughtfully.

“Consider though: rescuing Uncle Gladstone from that casino,” Louie added, tapping his fingers on his chin.

“What’s happening?” Donald asked the air, since nobody was looking at him. Nobody answered either.

“I think that time he left a date with Daisy to rescue Chito and I from a party was pretty cool, myself,” José tossed out. Louie glanced up, and the smug satisfaction on his face screamed that this had been his plan.

His plan to, what, embarrass Donald? If so, it was working; his face was slowly going red, and he tugged at his collar.

“Why would you need rescuing from a party?” Huey asked, tilting his head. Panchito laughed.

“There were some guests that did not like us, and we needed a speedy escape! Also, there was a fire,” he explained. Sure, lava lizards counted as a fire, right?

“A *fire?!”*

Donald watched as José floundered, trying to find an explanation that would work, while Panchito sowed chaos by explaining there had been a queen there too, and rubbed his face with fond exasperation. They were utterly ridiculous, the whole lot of them.

From the corner of his eye, Donald saw Scrooge squinting at the empty space on the table where the concertina had been sitting a few minutes ago. He looked baffled.

“Come on Unca Donald, this didn’t really happen, did it?” Dewey demanded, gesturing towards Chito and Zé with frustration. Donald considered.

“Yeah,” he finally replied, even though he’d lost track of what the current version of the story was, “it happened. It was some beach party.”

“But a queen?” Huey asked, “What was she even the queen *of?”*

“Goo,” Donald, José and Panchito answered at once.

“ *Goooooo,”* Panchito continued in a high-pitched voice, waving his arms around in imitation of the lava queen’s flailing. “Ah, she was

very unusual.”

“Definitely eccentric,” José added with a slow nod.

“She was a weirdo, and her friends lit the beach on fire,” Donald replied in a deadpan. They both laughed; the boys looked fully lost.

“Ah, perhaps you had to be there,” Panchito said after a moment.

“It’s like you three being in college all over again,” Scrooge grumbled.

Scrooge made his escape shortly after that, while Donald brought out ice cream for dessert. José and Panchito had to leave just afterwards; Donald trailed after them down the beach, until they stood at the car.

“Well, I’d say that was a success!” Panchito said brightly, leaning against José’s car with a pleased expression. José nodded.

“We didn't even have to fight a sea monster,” he added. Donald knocked on his own forehead immediately.

“Don’t say that, there’s still time,” he whined. Panchito took his hand away from his face and kissed his forehead.

“Do not hit my Donal’,” he warned in a teasing voice. Donald felt himself flush, and grumbled under his breath.

José waited until Panchito had moved out of the way to kiss Donald on the cheek.

"I hope we can do this again soon. Perhaps at the cabana next time? The boys have not been there," José offered; Donald felt a reluctant smile cross his face.

"I'll have to warn them about Humphrey first," he pointed out, but nodded as he did. It was high time that the boys met Ari and Humphrey.

"I think they have to worry about Ari more," Panchito chuckled. Donald snorted a laugh; that was true.

Then they were leaving, and the boys were helping with the dishes, Donald humming a tune as they worked. The boys kept glancing at him as they scrubbed, pensive.

Donald let himself get lost in the quiet clinking of the dishes. He missed this, the simple domestic moments with his family. He'd known that they would end someday, when the boys got older and more independent. Then, when he'd moved them to the Manor, and the boys got their own room, he'd known that they wouldn't come back. The Manor had more space, more cool stuff, and more people; even when he'd had the houseboat repaired, Donald had known it would never measure up.

He made sure that the boys knew their room was always their room, that their childhood home would always be open to them, but he wasn't holding his breath on them ever coming back for more than a night.

It made these little moments all the more precious.

“So, do you wish you guys lived together?” Huey asked quietly, eyes pinned to his dish towel. Donald’s hums faded to a stop as he considered the question.

“A bit,” he said after a moment, thinking of how watching their car pull away had ached, “But we’re still getting used to each other again. We’re trying not to dive in too fast.”

“But what about when you guys have been dating for a while? Are you gonna move, or are they gonna move in?” Huey continued, still not looking. Donald let out a breath.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, “We don’t have a plan that far out right now. Can’t really see myself moving out of the boat though. And this boat is a bit small for so many people.”

He could extend it, he supposed, if it came down to it. But he wondered if it would be worth the effort; José and Panchito were settled into the cabana right now, keeping Ari and Humphrey company and getting jobs in the area. It wasn’t like they could just take off down the coast, and that had been the main draw of the houseboat for the pair.

It was different for Donald; he loved the sea, loved living on it and being near it as much as possible. The houseboat was *his* home, no matter where the other members of his trio lived. No matter that the boys preferred dry land.

“But you boys know-”

“You wouldn’t make any decisions without asking us first, we know,”

Dewey finished. “But come on Unca Donald, you can tell us what you *want* to happen.”

That got Donald turning to look at his boys directly. They’d stopped doing dishes and were watching him closely.

“...I don’t want anything to happen, except for everyone to get along and be safe.” He said slowly. “That’s all.”

Each of the boys peered at him in their own way, then looked at each other silently, before they nodded and turned back to him.

“You’ll tell us, though, if you start wanting other stuff, right?” Huey asked, leaning forward. Donald smiled, feeling loved and a bit sad all at once. He gathered his boys into a tight hug, ignoring the damp spots on his shirt from their clutching wet hands.

“Course I will. Don’t worry about me, that’s my job.”

He's Building an Army

Donald had barely entered SHUSH headquarters before he was getting dragged to the lab levels by an agent he didn't recognize. They didn't know what he was getting called in for, which meant classified, which… didn't really narrow things down. Everything he was working on lately was classified.

Being carefully escorted into a private lab by one of the researchers, instead of finding his own way there, that stood out more. And having only himself, 330, Ravenson, and two of the lead scientists present, well. That was something.

"Good, you're here. We're just waiting for Gizmoduck now," Ravenson said when she saw him. Her expression was grim, a far cry from the innocent curiosity she'd exhibited the last time they'd spoken.

"What's going on?" He asked cautiously, letting the door swing shut behind him. The agent that had let him here vanished back down the hallway. Donald swept the room for bugs while the others spoke; he knew that their inventor was planning on defecting, but that hardly solved the immediate issue.

"We're waiting for Gizmoduck to begin. I would prefer not to repeat anything," Ravenson replied. Donald glanced at her, then at the scientists. He didn't know them either, but recognized their faces from the earlier review of the magic weapons.

"No Darkwing?" He asked, but he already expected the answer to be no, and was unsurprised when Ravenson shook her head.

"I don't believe he's needed for this part," was all she said. Donald considered commenting on it, but opted to wait for another time. He

didn't know why Ravenson trusted Gizmoduck more than Darkwing; was there something he should be worried about, or was it just that he knew the other hero better?

It *could* just be Gizmoduck was more knowledgeable about the technical side of things, but Donald didn't have time to pursue the thought, as Gizmoduck walked into the room, the same agent that had brought Donald in escorting him. Once again, the agent vanished down the hallway as the door shut.

"Thank you for joining us, Gizmoduck. Dr. Perkins, if you would?" One of the scientists, a white mouse, nodded and stepped forward, until he was just behind the main work table in the room. In front of him was one of the confiscated guns, and a small vial. As Donald looked closer, he realized it held a four leaf clover.

"Director," he said briefly, then looked back at them disdainfully. "As you commanded, we have not attempted to use the weapons confiscated in Spain, and we have ceased pursuing any attempts to drain the, ah, magical energy from the environment." His face was clearly irritated at the limitation, nose twitching.

"Ah, I'm glad to hear that! Paperinik made it pretty clear he was only willing to give us any information on the Blot if we made certain it wouldn't be used," Gizmoduck said cheerfully. He didn't lean forward, exactly, but he did stand straighter, and despite the laughter in his voice, his face was serious.

Donald, who had never said anything of the sort, tilted his head slightly to peer at him curiously. Gizmoduck didn't look over, merely looked at Dr. Perkins until the man coughed delicately and looked away.

"Yes. Well. I understand the subject is sensitive to magic practitioners,

and the hero Paperinik." He coughed again.

"As I was saying, we have abandoned that avenue of research. We are still investigating the weapons to understand how best to combat them; I understand that Gizmoduck and others are working on some kind of shield?" He asked, but didn't pause for an answer.

"In our review, we found a secondary power source in the weapons, separate from the power cell that appears to contain the magic energy. Our current theory is that they are not intended to be the ray weapons used by the Blot in his first attempts; they may be intended to harvest magical energy instead."

Donald felt very cold, staring down at the single gun on the table.

He was an *idiot* . Why hadn't it occurred to him that they were meant to steal magic? The Blot was trying to operate under the radar, and having a smaller, more portable means to do so was ideal. Hell, maybe that's how they had planned to attack people; just shoot them in the street and avoid kidnapping entirely. He'd been so focused on what the Blot had done *before,* he hadn't thought about what he was doing *next.*

"There were so many," he breathed, thinking back to the crates worth of weapons they had found. His early theory was that the Blot would charge them and sell them, but if they were to steal magic…

Why did they need so *many?*

Even if the Blot was working with FOWL, the volume of weapons seemed excessive. FOWL couldn't have recovered too many of their forces yet, but the number of weapons there... What were they expecting to do?

“Double Duck?” 330 called, drawing him back to reality. He looked up, all eyes on him, and he took a breath.

“If Dr. Perkins is correct,” he said slowly, “then the Blot is planning something big. Bigger than anything he did on his first run. Otherwise, why would he need that many weapons?”

They suspected that they hadn’t found them all. It didn’t bode well.

“...ah.” The doctor blinked, and the other scientist frowned down at the gun in concern. 330 and Gizmoduck were both looking at him. He waved them off, looking back at the clover in the vial.

“I assume you planned to test that, Doctor?” He asked. He didn’t want to test the thing. He didn’t want *anyone* to test it. What was better? To know for sure, so they could plan? Or avoid using those things, never commit that sin against the nature of magic itself? What if they missed information because they never looked at the evidence they had?

“Yes.” The other scientist answered. “Based on the lecture by, ah, Green Bat? We, er, I proposed this could have some of the magic energy. We hoped that Gizmoduck could confirm if this clover had any power, and test it? We thought it would be a less, erm…”

“We assumed that potentially taking magical energy from a plucked leaf was more tolerable of an experiment than a religious icon or a living person,” Perkins finished, looking irritated again, and he hefted the gun. “If everyone is content with that?”

Nobody protested. Donald swallowed his nausea and stayed silent. His skin prickled.

One test. That should be all they needed to confirm if their theory was correct. Just the one. He sent a silent apology to Lady Luck, and wondered vaguely if his own luck would take a hit for being in the same room as this.

Gizmoduck silently scanned the clover, and nodded briefly.

“It’s a small amount of energy,” he warned, “We don’t know if there’s a minimum needed to trigger the weapons…”

“We will never know if we continue dawdling,” Perkins snapped, and he pulled the trigger.

A few things happened at once. Donald stepped away harshly, instinct taking over, dragging 330 and Ravenson out of the direct line of fire. Gizmoduck activated the prototype magic shield, sliding in the other direction. There was a strange beam emitted from the gun, entirely clear but shimmering like a heat wave.

It hit the clover, which shuddered in its vial and went limp, and a small ball of glowing green returned to the gun. The power cell on the back lit up.

“Well, that answers that,” Ravenson said briskly. She stepped away from Donald to look closer at the weapon. “Do we have any indication that it could then be used to shoot someone? Or is it just a charging mechanism?”

“As far as we can tell from the structure, it doesn’t have any other settings, so it appears to only have the one function. I imagine if it was intended for offense, it would have an easy secondary trigger.”

“Magic users usually die or go into shock if they’re hit,” Donald said. “That *is* the offense.”

He stared at the clover. It was already pale and wilting, crumpled at the bottom of the vial.

“Yes, I suppose that would be effective, if you were certain that nobody you had to fight was not a magic practitioner,” Perkins replied. Donald almost told him that yes, the Blot had been completely certain that nobody but a magic user would even care about his crimes. That he’d *been* so certain, he’d purposefully used the earlier, much larger, versions of the gun in front of them on Donald, as Paperinik.

Several times.

Lucky for Donald, he hadn’t been a magic user at the time.

But saying any of that would be a step too far for his identity, so he shrugged minutely.

“Either that or they send others in with more traditional weapons, to cover their bases,” 330 offered. And wasn’t that an unpleasant thought too. That they might have enough people involved that they could afford to have two forces, for two different enemies in one.

The clover slumped further in the vial.

Donald found himself reaching forward across the table and taking the

gun.

The power cell was warm under his hands. It seemed to hum. He tugged at it, pulling and twisting. A voice nearby said something; he couldn't hear.

The cell slid free. The moment it was fully parted from the gun, the ball of green glowing energy drifted free and hovered in the air.

The voice stopped. The ball bobbed up and down, before it faded away into nothing. Donald could sense the energy dissipating into the atmosphere.

A cough behind him.

"I thought it would go back to the clover," Ravenson said in an absent tone. A few noises of agreement. Donald scoffed, shaking his head.

"Something about it being torn away doesn't let it go back," he replied, and his eyes caught Dr. Perkins. "The damage is permanent." The doctor looked startled at this.

"That information would have been useful," he blustered, but he and his fellow mouse were looking down at the gun in Donald's hands with more caution than before. Donald bit back a growl. He was *certain* they had been told before that there was no *fixing* this, but clearly either nobody was listening or nobody cared. Maybe this time it would stick.

"Nobody has faced these weapons besides Paperinik," Gizmoduck pointed out. "I guess he didn't tell us everything?" Well, no, *Paperinik*

hadn't, but hadn't José?

“He has not told us anything, in fact,” Ravenson said crisply, her composure snapping back into place as she straightened up. “We’ve had no direct contact with him. Perhaps you can assist in mitigating that.”

Gizmoduck met Donald’s eyes, expression unreadable under his visor. Donald repressed a wince. He hadn’t been able to go over the data that SHUSH had from the early case reports, and with nobody knowing about his identity *as* Paperinik, he couldn’t just sit down and talk about it. He was already toeing the line of secrecy.

What use was secrecy here, though? If the Blot hurt someone because Donald was keeping secrets…

But if someone he loved was hurt because of those secrets getting out… what if SHUSH was interested in Uno? What if Double Duck was compromised, and his other identity went with it?

Neither option was welcoming, especially with Ravenson already aware he was magically trained. She hadn’t done anything with that information, but she hadn't really had any time anyway, and Donald was certain she wouldn’t sit on it forever. She was still the head of a spy agency, and information was power.

Perkins wrapped up with a slightly stuttered explanation of their next steps, apparently rattled. They wanted to see if they could build a tracker that could pinpoint the specific energy from one of the guns. They wouldn’t have to charge another one, thankfully, as a few did have residual power that Perkins thought they should be able to use instead.

“Come, Doctor, we must prepare,” he finished, and marched out of the room with his fellow doctor trailing behind asking what they needed to prepare for, exactly.

“Well, thank you both for joining me here,” Ravenson said, looking at Donald and Gizmoduck. “Given what we have learned, please give me your insights.” She looked at Donald first, presumably since he actually worked here, unlike Gizmoduck, and he nodded.

“It seems clear he has help, and a lot of it, to justify making that number of weapons. Which tells me he’s found a pretty big supporter. What I can’t figure out is if he’s just sending people out into the world to shoot anyone they interact with, or if there’s a larger plan at work here.”

She nodded, then turned to Gizmoduck, who looked surprised to be included, and he took a moment to respond.

“Ah, I agree that this all seems to indicate he’s got plenty of support. Besides the volume of weapons, the quality of them speaks to a well equipped space to build, and the consistency of them says to me that he has an assembly line available to build parts. It also strikes me as strange that the power cell couldn’t be removed without releasing the energy. If he plans to gather it up like last time, then these weren’t built well. So what’s the angle there?”

“Another machine? One with more storage?” 330 suggested. He’d been quiet for a while, taking occasional notes in a notepad that he now set on the table. “Then they would just need to bring the guns back to the main lab site.”

“Seems risky, given how unstable the bigger ones were,” Donald pointed out.

“Which is also weird,” 330 replied thoughtfully. “The large ones exploded so easily, but these would need to be transported long distances. And none of them are showing issues like what we saw with the others.”

“Perhaps they’ve learned from their mistakes,” Ravenson mused. “It isn’t good business to have your weapons explode early.”

“Unless that’s the point,” Donald said, the words falling out of his beak before he could think them through. Everyone turned to look at him.

“The only two times we’ve seen those large power cells, they exploded. And thus far nobody has been able to connect Dr. Ghast to any larger organization, or find the buyers from the auction. What if they aren’t related, and the cells were unstable on purpose?”

“You mean, to intentionally take out the buyers? Why?” 330 asked, frowning.

“To take out the competition,” Gizmoduck suggested, looking uncomfortable at the idea. “There’s only so much power and money in the world, and another terrorist cell or mad scientist is in the way if you’re trying to take over the world or something.”

“So we may not be looking for a direct connection between the two, but a shared enemy that may have the means to be assisting the Blot,” Ravenson surmised, pursing her beak. Donald caught her eye and made a minute gesture towards himself and 330.

It might not be definitive, but there certainly was a group with the

means and the motive. The same group that was employing the mastermind behind their recent data breach. Speaking of that…

"Yes, Double Duck, FOWL is certainly on my radar as a suspect. Have you had any breakthroughs on that?" She asked, eyeing him. Donald opened his mouth, but was interrupted.

"The person that built the nanobot bugs works for FOWL," Gizmoduck declared loudly. Ravenson swung around to stare at him. He swallowed heavily.

"They- she- she wants out. She offered to give information on FOWL's plans and what else they've had her work on, in exchange for getting her out of there." He explained tensely. Donald watched him for a moment; he looked determined, convicted.

Nervous.

Then he looked at Ravenson and 330. They hadn't known in advance about that development. 330 looked slightly surprised, but satisfied. Ravenson looked as gobsmacked as he'd ever seen her, even as she pulled herself together.

"That's- we'll need to have further discussions about that. Who she is, what she may know. We cannot promise that no consequences will fall on her," Ravenson stated, and Gizmo nodded.

"Double Duck and I spoke about it briefly. She knows that she might have to deal with prison time, or some kind of parole. She doesn't want- she wants to do good things, Director. She thought that FOWL was giving her the opportunity."

“It sounds like you know her personally,” she observed, and her eyes darted back to Donald.

“I do.”

“And you trust her at her word? That this isn’t some trick to get information out of you?”

“I trust her. And I’m not planning on giving her any information until she’s out; we’re only communicating basics until she’s out of FOWL. Just to, uh, make sure…” he trailed off, losing steam, but Ravenson seemed satisfied.

“What’s the plan for extraction?”

“We have to wait to get the details. She’s out of communication right now,” GIzmoduck said apologetically. “New nanobots to replace the first bugs.”

“Fine. Then keep me posted when she *is* in communication again.”

“Why was I unaware that we had a member of FOWL willing to switch sides?” Ravenson asked the minute they were alone.

“He said he knew who had created the nanobots and begged me to give him time to talk to them first,” Donald replied. “That was when Green Bat was here; I hadn’t had the chance to follow up with him on it yet.”

“You didn’t seem surprised when he mentioned it just now.”

“At this point I’m expecting FOWL to be involved with everything. That’s why you gave me the mission, isn’t it?”

If it was just revealing that Gizmoduck had told *Donald,* not Double Duck, he would say it. But it had been *Fenton* telling *Paperinik* about his girlfriend Gandra Dee. He couldn’t think of a feasible way to explain that.

Ravenson watched him closely. He met her gaze.

“I meant to ask you, how did meeting him go, when Green Bat was here? I was under the impression you wouldn’t be speaking to him directly to keep it intact.”

“Didn’t have a choice, 330 pulled me in to discuss the nanobot issue. If he did realize my identity, he didn’t say anything.” He replied carefully.

Ravenson seemed to come to a conclusion.

“Help him with extracting this FOWL agent, that’s your priority one as soon as she’s back in communication. Don’t think I missed nobody giving this person a name, by the way. And I want a progress update on the FOWL/Phantom Blot connection soon. If you have nothing new to report, fine, but I want to be up to date,” she ordered. “I’m seeing a lot of coincidences and no concrete evidence, and I don’t like it.”

Donald nodded, and left the room.

330 was outside.

“Are you in trouble?” He asked hesitantly, as Donald led the way to his office.

“Probably,” he replied cheerfully. 330 winced.

“I should have told her the minute Gizmoduck said anything,” he moaned, “I was just distracted by Green Bat, and the magic thing, and we didn’t know anything solid yet-”

“Don’t worry about it, things happen,” Donald told him, patting the nervous chicken on the shoulder.

“But *you* got in trouble, and I was the one working with him! That should have been my report!”

“And next time you won’t forget, will you?” Donald asked, closing the office door and sweeping for bugs. 330 joined the search with a morose slant to his shoulders.

“Besides, her concern was primarily about something else, so if I am in any kind of trouble, it’s not because of you,” Donald added, feeling guilty.

“Wait, then what was it?”

“Can’t say, secret identity thing. Rest assured, it’s not a big deal.”

Well, so long as Ravenson thought he was keeping secrets to protect Gizmoduck’s identity, or Gandra Dee’s perhaps. If she realized he was also protecting his hero identity from her, they might have a bigger problem.

His knuckles rapped out against the desk without thought, but he was fairly certain he was jinxed regardless. After all, who got stuck with all the bad luck?

Bad Luck Duck

Donald cranked out a brief summary of the information they had on the Blot/FOWL (next to nothing outside of circumstantial events, so that was fast), submitted his tentative plans for upcoming missions, then checked his emails. He had a few requests to review some early trainees in the new group for final training, a scheduled call with Finn and B7 to go over some details of their latest raids. The latest list of identified faces from the prison footage, which he sent on to 330 and asked he focus on reviewing anyone visiting other prisoners that stopped coming after the Blot's supposed transfer.

His running theory was that the Blot had to have been contacted by someone on the outside, to make the breakout as smooth as it was, but that didn't mean they had to visit him directly. Another prisoner, or maybe a guard, could have been the go-between.

There were other agents looking into it as well, but he wanted 330 to look for any connection, no matter how tenuous, with FOWL specifically. They needed some traction on this theory, or they needed to drop it, because right now, all they had were coincidences. Gandra working for FOWL was a big one, certainly, but it was just as likely FOWL had sold any information they got to whoever could use it.

But before he started any of that, he texted Darkwing.

PK: hey, are you going to be free/ in duckburg anytime soon?

He got no immediate response, which was fair enough, the man was technically nocturnal despite the number of times he'd been willing to meet during the day. The bright side of them knowing each other's identities, though, was that they could meet as Drake and Donald, which opened some opportunities.

That sent, he hopped into the call with B7 and Finn.

“Double Duck! Glad you could join us,” Finn said, while B7 made an agreeing noise.

“Nice to hear from you. What’s new?”

“Well,” B7 said slowly, “after the two old FOWL bases showed signs of being used, we went to look into the rest of the ones in our territory. Most of them were just as abandoned as they were before, but there were two that we think were in use recently.”

“Both of them were in Turkey,” Finn added. “Which struck us as worth exploring, since we haven’t had any confirmed activity in the area, just rumors and some unconfirmed intel.”

“Unlike Spain and Germany,” Donald said thoughtfully. “Have there been any suspicious accidents in the area? The power cells have been so unstable so far, we might have missed it.”

“We’re checking into it now. Things have been quiet in Turkey, as far as we’ve been able to find, but I’m going over everything again. Too many things have slipped under the radar lately, and we *have* seen some movement in Greece. Not that much of a jump,” B7 replied.

“Greece also has a large shipping industry, so there’s a chance they moved the cells out of the area that way, if they were being built there,” Finn pointed out. Donald winced at the idea.

“Do we have any idea how the cells overloaded in Spain? The ones in Duckburg were in use at the time, but as far as we know the others

were just being transported at the airport," Donald asked, considering. The gun cells hadn't had any issue, which made the Spain explosion stand out all the more.

"Our scientists haven't been able to confirm what triggered the meltdown," Finn said. He sounded frustrated. "Not that we have a well-staffed lab at the moment. Field agents aren't the only thing we're low on, lately."

Which was a concern. Come to think of it, hadn't there been a disproportionate number of mad scientists lately?

"Can I make an odd request?" Donald asked, and when he received an affirmative noise he continued: "Ask your on-site scientists if they know of anyone recruiting scientists or engineers lately. Job offers that they thought had red flags." He sent an email to Dr. Perkins at the same time, figuring he at least knew him by name.

"What are you looking for?" B7 asked, tense.

"I noticed a few months ago that we've had a number of villains with scientific backgrounds attacking Duckburg lately. More than I would think was normal," Donald started.

"You're thinking they're being recruited? Not just a random occurrence?" Finn asked.

"Or they're focusing on Duckburg because Duckburg has a hero again?" B7 added.

Donald shrugged, despite them not being able to see him.

“Could be either, but it’ll only take a minute to ask, right?” He pointed out. “But at this point, I’m willing to look under any rock to get a lead. Right now it feels like we’re spinning our wheels.”

“Sounds like a wild goose chase,” B7 pointed out. Donald made a neutral noise, unconcerned. He could always go around them and ask himself; Dr. Perkins probably had contact information for the other SHUSH scientists and engineers.

“I’ll ask around and send them to you if we hear anything concrete,” Finn offered finally, sounding dubious.

“I appreciate it. Has anything else come up in your area?” Donald continued, jotting down a note to add the Turkish FOWL locations to his next mission locations. Unlike his fellow agents, he was magically trained. He might be able to pick up more information if he went in person.

“Nothing comes to mind. We do have a few agents requesting your magic expert visit other bases to give a seminar, since not everyone could make the trip across the pond,” Finn said.

Well that could be messy, but José was more than capable of making decisions himself, if he was asked.

“I can pass that along if you haven’t reached out to the Director yet,” he offered, but Finn confirmed he had already passed the request up the chain, and they wrapped up the call. It was already nearly midnight for B7 and Finn, he didn’t want to keep them up any longer.

DD: can you meet in st canard? Otherwise im not free until thursday, and

tahts kinda iffy

PK: I can meet you. Where?

Darkwing gave an address Donald didn't know, and said he'd be there at sundown. Which gave Donald an hour and some change to grab his costume and get there.

Not enough time for an actual meal, but he could get some coffee and a bagel at least. He had food at home if he was still hungry.

He ended up in the same coffee shop that he and José had visited, waiting in line behind a nervous younger woman who stuttered out a complicated order read off her phone.

Donald waited as patiently as he could, tapping his foot. The girl was pale and shaky, double and triple checking her phone screen before finally passing it over to the barista. Donald squinted at her with mild curiosity; he was pretty sure that was the same barista working as last time, too.

"Ma'am, that isn't physically possible," the barista (he couldn't see her name tag from where he stood) said in an apologetic tone. The girl winced.

"You're the third place I've tried," she admitted, taking the phone back. "But he insisted that he always gets this order! I can't go back without it!"

The barista shook her head, braids clacking against each other.

“There is no way to make the ice stay on the bottom of the cup,” the barista said slowly, “and that many syrups in one cup are going to make a sludge anyway.” She looked apologetic. The girl looked near tears, nodding and shuffling away. She was dialing while Donald ordered his own coffee and a bagel sandwich, and had a quiet conversation in the corner of the shop.

He could hear tinny yelling coming from her phone, but couldn’t hear the words. The barista winced at a particularly shrill shout, but continued making Donald’s coffee without reacting.

“Is that a common problem?” He asked, gesturing towards the young woman and her still shrieking phone. The barista, Jane according to her sparkly name tag, glanced over as well and shrugged.

“Weird coffee orders, sure, we get those a lot. Impossible orders are a bit less common,” she said neutrally, eyeing him with with a bit more focus than he expected. The shrieking from the phone got louder, then cut off. The girl let out a shuddering sigh and fell into a seat, clutching the phone in both hands like a lifeline.

“... and a hot chocolate, please,” Donald said just before he handed over his card. Jane blinked, shrugged, and rang up the new total.

When his order was done, he quietly set the hot chocolate on the table in front of the still-shaking girl. She looked up, eyes red-rimmed but dry, and gave him a wobbly smile, whiskers drooping.

“Thanks,” she said quietly. Her phone buzzed; she flinched and shoved it further away from her.

“Looked like you needed a pick-me-up,” he replied. He would have said more, asked if she was okay, but before he could, the doors burst open with the sound of… air horns?

“What is *up,* people! Mark Beaks is in the *house!”* A gray parrot crowed as he strolled in, doors held by a buff falcon in a dark suit. The parrot, apparently Mark Beaks, was holding up his phone, still playing air horns as he posed.

The coffee shop was empty besides Donald, Jane, and his still shaky companion, so he wasn’t sure who the guy was performing for. Himself? Wasn’t he a billionaire CEO?

Didn’t these billionaires have anything better to do? At least Scrooge *worked* for his fame and fortune.

“I am gracing you all with my presence, you’re welcome, because apparently if you want the *perfect* coffee, you’ve got to go and get it yourself! Also, unrelated, my latest assistant decided not to come in today. Or ever again, I guess.”

Beaks shrugged, a mildly puzzled expression on his face, like it was a complete mystery how these things happened to him. The falcon, probably a bodyguard, stepped in behind him and didn’t react to his boss’ speech.

The girl with Donald sniffled, scrubbing her face rapidly. He shifted slightly to hide her from view, which unfortunately seemed to catch Beaks’ attention. Either that, or he realized that they were the only people in the building.

“Sup, dudes, no autographs, sorry but I don’t sign things ever, buuut if you want a selfie I’d be *happy* to- hey, don’t I know you?” He said, as

his eyes shifted from the girl to Donald with a frown. Donald felt his eyebrows rise up his face.

“You almost got my nephews killed.” He said bluntly, fist clenching over the paper bag of his sandwich.

Beaks blinked, then waved a hand in Donald’s face; he nearly leaned forward to bite it.

“Didn’t catch that, scratchy voice guy. Something about news? Nephews? Yeah…. Nah, I don’t associate with kids, that’s not it,” he said dismissively, and glanced at the phone in his hands.

“Oh, wait, you’re that guy going viral! The gay dude from the airport!” He exclaimed, and Donald felt his face go pale, then red in rage.

“ *Excuse me?”* He snarled, voice crackling. His teeth clenched. The bodyguard, standing just behind Beaks, glanced at him and shifted forward a step.

“Yeah, that was the one, hold on, I saw a great remix of that-” Beaks said, eyes on his phone. Donald felt his anger sputter, too baffled to know how to react. Jane, still behind the counter, cringed and looked away.

Some pop song Donald didn’t know started playing out of Beak’s phone, which he waved in front of Donald’s face with a smug grin.

“See, yeah, here it is! Look, you and those other two!” On the blurry screen, Donald could vaguely see what he thought was José and

himself. They were surrounded by popping animated hearts and sparkles, which obscured their faces enough that it hardly mattered, but once again Donald felt uncomfortably on display. He shoved the phone away.

Beaks didn't even react, tapping at the screen again.

"Gonna need to post this, you're really hot right now," he said, like a command, before spinning and leaning backwards into Donald's space, holding out the phone away from him while throwing up a peace sign with his free hand.

The camera flashed once, twice. Beaks spun away while Donald was still blinking spots out of his eyes.

"Ugh, you really don't photograph well, did you know that?"

Was getting kicked out of this coffee shop worth punching him? Donald was fast, he could probably get some damage in before the bodyguard intervened.

But he *liked* this place, it was close to work, and usually not too busy… Plus he'd hate to make trouble for Jane...

Donald scowled, shoving past Beaks to leave. As he walked by, he smacked the phone out of the air. It let out a dramatic crack as it bounced off the table and hit the floor. He paused, waiting for the inevitable freakout, but Beaks pulled a new phone out like it was nothing, already tapping away without a reaction.

Well, if he wasn't going to demand Donald replace the phone, he

wasn't going to stick around to give him the idea. He stormed out of the shop.

"Hey, wait, we need a better selfie-!"

What was *with* him?

Donald stormed down the sidewalk, grumbling and growling to himself. Kicked at a lamppost, immediately regretted it when his toes connected with a painful thunk. Swore. Nearly tried punching the same lamp post, before he caught himself and kept walking. Finally got to his car and got moving before he could give in to the temptation to turn around and go after Beaks anyway.

It wasn't until he was already miles down the road that he realized that he'd left his coffee at the shop.

The address Darkwing had given him turned out to be the sketchiest bar Donald had ever seen, and he had seen his fair share. The sign was so worn out that it was barely visible against the grimy brick, and he thought he could see bullet holes in the crumbling walls. He texted Darkwing to confirm, and was told to just come inside, not in costume.

Donald tossed his suit jacket and tie in the backseat, rolled up the sleeves of his shirt to his elbows, undid the top button, and called it good enough to go in. He was clearly still coming from an office, but hopefully he could blend in well enough to get by. The place looked like it catered more blue collar than white, but he didn't have anything spare in the car that wasn't another button down. It was either this or the spare cape in the glove compartment that he'd forgotten to put away.

What a time to miss his sailor uniform, he thought with a snort.

He went inside. Just inside the door was a short, muscled woman that looked like a Beagle Boys cousin. She glanced at him, nodded, then went back to leaning quietly against the wall.

The interior of the bar was dark, and without touching anything Donald knew most of the surfaces would be sticky. It smelled of beer and dank air, with a hint of saltwater. There was a decent crowd inside, sitting in twos and threes at low, rickety tables. In the corner of the room was a pool table surrounded by a number of people in worn shirts and heavy boots, cheering loudly.

He spotted Darkwing, or rather Drake, sitting at a corner table and watching the room. He had a glass of water in front of him, untouched. He was dressed in a simple, dark t-shirt, feathers rumpled like he'd just rolled out of bed.

Donald strode over, flopping into the opposite chair with a dramatic screech. Drake gave him a wild eyed look at the noise, which Donald ignored, sliding into a more comfortable position.

An extremely bored-looking woman walked over, notepad in hand, and eyed Drake like he'd personally offended her before turning to Donald.

Donald smiled at her tiredly.

"Can I get ya anything?" She asked. She hadn't brought a menu, and didn't look like she had a pen to go with the notepad.

“A beer, and whatever food is the fastest,” Donald answered, while Drake gave him a Look and pointedly sipped his water.

“That’s our fried pickles,” she told him, still not taking any notes. Donald nodded.

“And you? Still good with water?” She asked, glancing briefly at Drake. It sounded like it wasn’t the first time she had asked him.

“He’ll take any weird soda you’ve got. Or sparkling water,” Donald told her with a conspiratorial grin, and she chuckled. It was more of a humoring chuckle, but at least she smiled. He’d take that as a win.

“We’ve got grapefruit,” she promised, and left while Drake sputtered into his water.

“Do you usually drink on the job?” He grumbled once their server was out of earshot. Donald rolled his eyes, and made a presenting gesture around the room.

“When we’re in a *bar,* yeah,” he explained. “You’re going to stick out like a sore thumb if you’re not eating, drinking, or meeting with someone who is.”

And he’d truly earned a drink. So who cared that this was a work meetup, he was having a drink.

Drake eyed him, and cast a casual glance around the room. He leaned forward casually, slumped like he was just exhausted and too tired to

hold himself fully up.

“I’ve heard a few rumors that someone is hiring people to unload cargo from this bar. Cash only,” he explained, sidestepping the previous topic entirely. Donald huffed a breath that was almost a laugh, before he leaned forward.

“Are you planning on taking them up on the offer, or just observing?” Donald asked, leaning on just one hand like they were talking about something boring.

“Just looking for now. I don’t want my face on their radar,” Drake replied quietly. He glanced briefly over Donald’s shoulder. “The guy setting up the jobs is at the dartboard right now.”

Donald waited a moment, before he glanced over, as the dartboard let out a triumphant recorded cheer at an apparently good shot.

The person at the dartboard was apparently playing alone, a tall stork in a threadbare sweater that had seen better decades. He looked stressed, by Donald’s estimation; there were dark shadows under his eyes and his shoulders were tight. Whether that was relevant or just a byproduct of working late hours, he didn’t know.

“Think he knows?” Donald asked as he turned back. Drake shrugged.

“Couldn’t say. Can’t imagine he’s completely clueless, but I don’t know yet.” So saying, he took another sip of his water, the straw slurping loudly.

“How’d you find him, anyway?”

“Eh, found a guy, who knows a guy, who said if you wanted to make some cash unloading boxes at the docks, he knew a few people that were hiring. Insisted that there were no weapons or drugs involved, and that narrows the field pretty far,” Drake explained. “I guess that’s a popular selling point to some people.”

“Lots of folks are just down on their luck,” Donald pointed out. “They don’t want anyone to get hurt; plausible deniability is good, but knowing you aren’t moving anything dangerous into your neighborhood is probably better.”

Drake nodded thoughtfully. Their server strode by, sliding two drinks and a basket of fried pickles that were still steaming. She moved on almost immediately, back to the bar, leaning against the rail and chatting with the bartender. Everyone in the building was a sleepy kind of peaceful, a quiet contentment that came with being exhausted, yet comfortable. If it wasn’t so far from home, Donald wouldn’t mind coming back.

Drake took a sip of his soda, making a face before taking another, slower sip thoughtfully.

“It's... not bad,” he explained at Donald’s raised eyebrow.

“They could be smuggling forgeries or something,” Donald continued their previous conversation, munching on a pickle. Still too hot; he let out the steam with a hiss. Drake nodded, waving one hand back and forth in an iffy motion.

“Maybe, but it’s a possibility at least. Figure I’ll take a peek around and move on if it’s antiquities or artwork. Pass it along if it turns out to be Cuban cigars or something,” Drake said casually. He proceeded

to outline the last lead he'd followed similarly, which had turned up smuggled Blue Rays, and joked bleakly that the cops were going to love him soon if he kept finding them easy smuggling cases.

Donald wanted to ask how many dead ends he'd chased down this way, but he was distracted by a commotion at the door, and glanced over. The bouncer had moved to block the door, and was apparently arguing with someone standing outside. He couldn't quite hear over the general din of the room, only catching a word or two, but she sounded blandly annoyed. Sounded like someone wasn't allowed in, and was pretty angry about it.

He looked back at Drake, who had taken the distraction as an opportunity to steal a pickle. Donald glared; Drake grinned back, unrepentant, and took another.

"Do you-" he started, but was interrupted by the argument at the door getting loud enough to hear.

"Uh yeah, don't know what your name is, but do you know who I am?"

Donald felt a cold dread wash over him, stiffening in his chair. Drake glanced over his shoulder at the door.

"Was that Mark Beaks?" He hissed, not quite an accusation, but definitely concerned. Donald nodded tightly.

"What is he *doing* here?" Drake continued, baffled.

"I think," Donald said in a low tone, "that he followed me here from

Duckburg.” And then he downed the entirety of his drink in a long, painful swallow.

Interlude: Drake and Meeting your Heroes: Part Two

“He *followed you?”* Drake demanded, so beyond confused that he almost shouted. He bit his beak and glanced around, but thankfully everyone around them was either engrossed in their own business or watching the drama at the door, not looking at two average ducks drinking in a corner.

Damn it all, Donald had clearly been right, because alone Drake had had a lot more curious looks directed his way. Either having company or at least having drinks and food on the table was more important than he’d realized. Noted for next time, but not currently useful.

Donald nodded, and underneath his exhaustion he looked miserable. And guilty.

Wait, guilty?

Oh. Yes, his tone probably came across as accusing.

“Why would he follow you?” He continued, in a lower tone.

Donald glanced at the door, where the argument with the bouncer continued, and then back at Drake.

“Would you believe he wanted my picture?” He asked in a tired tone. Drake wanted to take it as a joke, but…

Well, Beaks was supposed to be a glory hound, according to what he'd heard (and between Gizmoduck and Fenton, he'd heard a lot.) Donald was a bit internet famous at the moment.

A bit. Barely worth the attention. A smidge.

Alright, the man was going viral for the fifth time, it seemed like, and Drake could admit he was a bit jealous of it, but Donald didn't look like he was enjoying it. And yeah, getting outed by the internet when he had, according to what Drake had heard, not even told his *family* yet, wasn't an ideal way of getting famous. The previous instances, his old band making some waves and getting some notice for being friends with Mickey Mouse of all people, those were more positive moments, but Donald seemed like he valued his privacy more than a moment in the limelight.

Not to mention the superhero thing. He'd mentioned issues with Angus Fangus in the past, and Drake remembered some of the headlines being pretty harsh; Donald clearly didn't have a great relationship with the press or fame in general.

He should really think about what the media could mean for his work, both day and night. Thus far he'd only tackled a few bigger crimes, with only Taurus Bulba as a major, attention-grabbing success. One that had gotten his name out there, had gotten him on the news and cameras pointing his way. But the attention had been short-lived (and that was probably a good thing, since it kept attention away from Gosalyn).

The Blot was still on the down-low, it wasn't even public knowledge that he was out (and was that wise? Not informing the public? He was still new to things like that), so Darkwing Duck was still not a household name.

Yet. he would be, someday.

"So, you ran into him…?"

"At a coffee shop, wanted a pick-me-up before the drive over. Which I left on the table, damn it all," Donald grumbled, and huh, he didn't think he'd ever heard the man curse. Funny, since he was apparently a Navy veteran and a sailor.

"Well," Drake started, and realized he had no idea what to say afterwards. The situation was too weird, he had no idea how to handle it.

"Is this something that happens often…?" He tried after a minute. The bouncer was getting no louder, but her stance was getting clearly more irritated, and he wondered if she would physically remove Beaks from the doorway, or if she planned to wait him out. Beaks' voice was getting slightly more shrill; he couldn't hear the words clearly, but the *tone* was very clearly 'do you know who I am?'

"Eh," Donald said, waving a lazy hand. "We had a few curious people when we moved in with Scrooge, way back when. But mostly people just wanted to kidnap me or Della for ransom."

"You've been *kidnapped?"* Drake demanded, turning to stare at Donald directly again. Donald looked unconcerned, crunching on another fried pickle.

"Couple of times," he said, like it was normal, "but most people don't think Scrooge will pay a ransom, so kinda a waste of time. Della decided to be so annoying that they let her go, that cut it down a lot."

“And you?” Drake prompted, because Donald had clearly skipped himself. Donald looked him in the eye, and he smirked. It was an expression he recognized; it was Paperinik’s smirk. The one he’d seen in video recordings and newspaper clippings, poured over as an angsty teenager and as a brand-new hero. The one that promised *pain,* and *mischief,* and *justice.*

“I made them regret it,” he said simply.

Drake took a pickle, needing something to occupy his hands.

“Think your project for the night might be thoroughly trashed though,” Donald continued, with an extremely vague gesture at the dartboard behind him and the ongoing fight by the door. His target was glancing at the door with discomfort; he was certainly going to bolt soon. And even if he didn't, Drake would bet his vintage comic collection that nobody would be approaching for under the table work with the commotion. Even if Beaks left, anyone interested would probably be too jumpy to risk it.

“Eh, we’ll see. Meantime, didn’t you have something you wanted to talk about?” Because that was the main reason Donald had wanted to come here, to tell him something. It wouldn’t have occurred to Drake to call him in for a sting otherwise.

Come to think of it, if the other hero was interested…?

No. Darkwing was a mostly solo act, with Launchpad as a partner and support when he could be there. Drake liked Donald, and *loved* working with Paperinik, one of his early idols (after the original Darkwing of course, but the shine had come off just a bit after… everything with Jim. He still loved the show, the character, everything that had helped him through the hardest parts of his life, but…

But. It was hard to separate the character from the actor. Jim Sterling had *been* Darkwing Duck, and Darkwing had been him. And it was hard to forget his hero trying to kill him, even if he had saved all of their lives just after. It had been a complicated day.)

Anyway, liking working with his friend didn't mean he wanted a permanent partnership. He needed to make sure Darkwing Duck could stand on his own, not on the reputation of another hero.

Working with him was still a thrill, though. He would admit that, at least to himself.

"Right." Donald said, pressing his beak together tightly. "New development on the Blot, wanted to keep you in the loop."

Drake sucked in a sharp breath, and he leaned in, the rest of the room fading into nothing.

He didn't say anything, didn't want a moment of delay. Had they found a lead? A confirmed sighting, a victim?

"Nothing exciting," Donald said to his enthusiasm. "It's *bad.* "

And coming from the original investigator, that was something to be concerned about.

"What is it?" He asked, when Donald stopped, face twisting.

Drake had never directly dealt with the Blot. He'd never met a victim, even. When he'd thought that he'd found a connection, he'd honestly been a bit *excited,* figuring it was a big case, a heavy one. A way to fully join the big leagues, take down a villain that an old hero once had. Proving he could take up the mantle of *hero.*

He hadn't known much about the victims. He knew about the *smuggling.*

Then he'd actually met PK, and heard firsthand what the Blot had done, and abruptly it wasn't exciting anymore.

"We- Well, SHUSH found a load of weapons that they thought, initially, were using smaller versions of the power cells to create some kind of ray gun. None of them were powered, so the idea was that he hadn't recovered enough magic power to finish them."

"But…?" Drake asked, feeling dread. He'd been told that the spy agency had found some signs of the Blot in Europe, but hadn't been given the details, only that they hadn't found *him.*

"They're not guns, exactly. Or, they don't shoot magic," Donald explained grimly. "They're the newest version of his magic *theft* machines."

A pause, while Drake considered that information. They'd found what they thought was an arsenal that the Blot was in the middle of building, to either sell or provide his backers. What they'd realized was that they had an arsenal of weapons to fill those power cells instead.

How many allies did he have to need *that* many weapons?

No wonder Donald looked like he'd gone through the ringer. Drake felt like he'd just been thrown into a brick wall, ears ringing and head pounding, trying to remember which way was up.

"Do we know who they were for?" He asked after a long, long breath, and Donald shook his head.

"SHUSH has some theories they're chewing over, but right now we've got a lot of information and nothing to tie it to," Donald answered.

Which raised a new question, Drake realized. How did Donald know any of this? He hadn't been at any of the (very few) meetings Drake had had with SHUSH, and while it could be that he was speaking to them other times, the last time he'd been there, the Director had asked if he could contact PK, so it didn't really seem like they were in contact.

Was he helping as Donald Duck, maybe? Or he could have a contact on the inside, possibly?

He opened his beak to try to ask about it, curious and a bit concerned with what the source for this was, but the noise at the door reached a fever pitch and there was a clatter of someone smacking hard into a doorway.

"I'll just be a minute, no need to freak out, and *obviously* I'm over 21, why would you need to see my ID, honestly," Beaks said loudly, showy, as he stepped around the bouncer's prone form sprawled against the wall, clutching her head. Above her, a muscled falcon in a cheap suit loomed. He didn't look like he'd been the one to push her, but he made no move to help her up.

Behind the bar, their server and the beagle bartender startled. The bartender reached below the counter, the server moved towards the phone on the wall.

Several tables of people, deckhands and construction workers and undefinable others with callouses on their hands and aches in their arms, stilled and froze. All eyes followed Beaks as he made his nonchalant way across the room. Beaks was oblivious, chattering into his phone and looking around the room like he hadn't just assaulted the bouncer.

"Hey everyone, wow this place is kinda grim, in that 'I work with my hands instead of my brain kinda way,' and oh, there he is!" Beaks crowed, turning his phone to point at Donald and Drake's table with a triumphant expression.

Well, good thing Donald was with him, Drake thought wildly. It wasn't that weird to get a drink with a friend, surely nobody would wonder about it. If anyone noticed him and thought about his presence at all.

His jealousy of Donald's current fame melted away, leaving only nauseous anxiety. If anyone suspected his identity, and he did anything in connection to the information he got here…

Beaks approached casually, grabbing a chair from a nearby table and dragging along the floor. It screeched on the grimy tile, loud in the silent room.

Donald was very, very still, watching Beaks with a cold calculation that seemed to burn in the shadows they sat in. One hand was tapping on the table, almost casual. The other was gripping the edge hard enough that the cheap material was splintering around his fingers.

“So here you are! Wow, what a weird place to run into you, but hey, let’s get that selfie!” Beaks continues to ramble, only briefly glancing at Donald before going back to his screen. Was he live streaming? Drake was pretty sure he was live streaming.

The phone came up to capture Donald’s face on the screen, fast enough that neither of them had time to really react to it. And honestly, Drake had no idea *how* to react. He’d had a few paparazzi in his time, but they weren’t so *bold,* and he couldn’t think of anything else even comparable to this.

Donald swatted the phone away from his face with a growl. The table was permanently dented into four perfectly finger-shaped impressions, and the particle board underneath was still crumbling beneath his flexing fingertips.

Beaks swung the screen up again. Donald smacked it harder this time, and it went flying across the room. Surprisingly, there was no shattering sound, just a clack and a clatter as it skidded to a stop under a table. Beaks glanced at his hand, then where it had landed.

“See, I don’t think you realized I was streaming-” he started, in the smuggest, most condescending tone that Drake had *ever* heard, before Donald reached out again and grabbed his wrist.

“You should ask permission before filming someone,” he snapped, teeth gritted, and Beaks blinked at him, then at his wrist, before looking behind him.

“Heh,” he said, tone somewhere between amused and startled, “that’s funny. Cause, see, most people would ask, but obviously being on camera with *me* is different from, like, randos doing it, so clearly

asking isn't-" he stopped, while Donald's knuckles slowly tightened.

"Randos?" Donald asked, but he was looking at Drake, not Beaks, and had one eyebrow raised. His face was red, across the bridge of his beak, but he looked… calm, maybe.

Calculating. There was the slightest hint of mischief in his eyes.

Drake tilted his head to one side, considering Beaks like he had just noticed he was there, taking a long sip of his grapefruit soda.

Which was surprisingly good, honestly, he might have to order another one.

"I mean, I didn't invite him," Drake said consideringly, looking briefly at Beaks' huffing face, before turning back to Donald. "Did you invite him?"

From the corner of his eye, he saw the bodyguard shift, tensing as a few bar patrons ambled closer. He could just make out the bouncer, back on her feet, shifting to flank him.

He kept his face forward, expression inquisitive, while Donald hummed in thought.

"No, I didn't invite him either," he said after a thoughtful pause. "And we're not *friends,* so I can't see why he thought he was invited."

Here, Donald turned back to look at Beaks, who was fruitlessly

tugging at his trapped wrist with his free hand, looking lost and a bit panicked.

“Wouldn’t that make you a rando?” Donald asked, curious, while Beaks struggled.

“I mean, sounds like he followed you from Duckburg,” Drake added, leaning his cheek onto his palm. “Think that makes him more of a stalker than a rando.”

Beaks made an affronted noise, but he seemed beyond words. His face was the picture of shock, actually, which made the whole thing a bit funnier.

“Hmm,” Donald hummed. He seemed to be putting *no* effort in holding Beaks still, despite his continued tugging, and Beaks wasn’t *big* by any means, but it was still impressive. Drake squinted at his arms, which weren’t even straining, and then at the dented table.

“How strong *are* you?” He asked, more to himself than to Donald, while the bouncer finally made her way to the table. They both looked up; Beaks twisted slightly but couldn’t quite leave his seat.

“Is this guy bothering you.” She snarled, not even as a question. Behind her, the bodyguard was tense and still, surrounded by several very casual people. None of whom were talking.

“That depends,” Donald replied cheerfully, and he glanced back at Beaks. “Are you going to leave?”

Beaks huffed, glared, tugged again at his trapped arm.

“Pretty sure I can’t with you squeezing my hand like that,” he said, clearly aiming for bravado, but he sounded winded and off-balance. Donald raised one eyebrow.

“And, you know, if you *keep* squeezing, I’m gonna file for assault,” Beaks added, recovering his smug tone.

Donald’s fingers released. There were red marks underneath grey feathers, but it probably wouldn’t even bruise. Beaks made a show of yanking his arm back to his chest and wincing anyway.

“But…” he continued, ignoring the bouncer entirely, leaning back in his chair, “since we’re *such* good friends and all, I guess I can-”

His chair flew backwards with a *screech* and a *crash,* and Beaks went toppling to the floor with a shocked shout. Drake jumped, heart hammering, and glanced down in time to see Donald’s foot sliding back under the table.

“You- you- what the *hell!* ” It seemed that Beaks was at a loss for words. He scrambled to his feet, nearly knocking over another table in the process, and only then seemed to notice the other patrons giving him dark looks. He hesitated, then stormed back to their table, sliding past the bouncer without a glance.

“Dude, that totally still counts as an attack, and I’m pretty sure this place will have it on camera, and you know, I’m a pretty forgiving guy and all, but between that and the *two* phones you trashed, think I’m gonna have to-”

He was cut off again, this time by a tight grip around his upper arm.

“I think I told you to leave,” the bouncer growled, “not to bother our customers. Now, you gonna go quietly, or do I have to throw you out the door?”

“Uh,” Beaks laughed, tossing his shoulder to dislodge her hand, “think again sweetie, you should be *grateful* that I was even willing to step into this dump of a place, you’re not tossing me *anywhere.”*

“Sweetie?”

“Hoo boy,” the bartender hissed to himself, taking a half step back.

“ *Sweetie?”*

Drake leaned back in his seat, reminded harshly of the heat before the sparks became a wildfire.

Beaks rolled his eyes and gestured at his bodyguard.

“Jim, can you get us some privacy, cause the vibes here are *waay* rancid,” he ordered loftily, waving his hand around like some kind of lord. “And get me my phone while you’re at it.”

There was a silent pause, where the bodyguard, Jim apparently, eyed the bouncer and the bartender gripped his bat tighter, shifting from one foot to the other, and the bouncer stood very, very still.

Beaks snapped, not even looking at them.

“Chop chop!”

“Yeah, no,” the bouncer said, and she grabbed Beaks again, dragging him out of the room.

“Wait, what are you doing? Jim, hey Jim, come on man, what am I even paying you for-?”

Jim stepped in the bouncer’s way, a grim expression on his face. The bartender smacked the bat into his hand and stepped up next to them.

Donald’s hand slipped out to grab his beer bottle at the neck. Drake felt his teeth clench at the tension, and loosened his jaw.

Beaks flailed as the bouncer stopped moving, swinging his arms around enough to smack one of the nearby tables and knock several drinks to the floor. The people that had been sitting there jumped up with a shout.

The pressure snapped like a rubber band, and the bar descended into chaos.

BAR FIGHT

Donald had a good sense for when things were getting dangerous. Violent. The receding waters before the typhoon. He could rarely *avoid* said things, but he could tell when he was about to have a punch thrown at his face or when tension would just fizzle out.

This was the former.

As soon as Beaks knocked into the table, it was like a switch had been flipped. Jim the bodyguard threw himself at the bouncer (and Donald regretted that he didn't know her name, it felt rude), who tossed Beaks to the side to dodge, and Beaks was screaming as he flew through the air into another table, and the bartender was raising his bat to hit Jim with-

Donald managed to snort in disbelief, because of course this happened to *him* , before he took the beer bottle in one fist and dove into the nonsense, smashing the glass into Jim's unprotected head.

See, Jim was a big guy, and he was certainly trained in combat; you could tell by the way he held his body, where he placed his feet, how he hit. Donald took a glancing blow to the eye with a grunt, and yeah, the guy could throw a punch. The muscles certainly weren't just for *looks.*

The issue was, he was clearly *trained,* in judo and possibly another art, that kick looked like jiu-jitsu, which wasn't the same as having been in an actual fight. Classroom and dojo versus the streets. He could take someone one on one, most likely, maybe even a small group in a more organized setting, but well, this was a bar fight.

Traditional fights rarely had beer bottles or chairs used as weapons, in

Donald's experience.

Drake leapt in and caught Jim's head in a tight grip, covering his eyes, while Donald jabbed at his kidneys and the bartender swung the bat at his legs. Jim struggled wildly, smacking Drake upside the head with a flail, and his feet skidded on the wet floor. The bouncer had gotten back up after the initial tackle and was reaching to grab Jim's arms in some kind of full-nelson attempt.

Drake, now Drake clearly had combat training, but he'd *used* it, moved from a trained stance to a brawler's in an instant, throwing a punch that any barfly would be proud of before using a controlled roll that likely came from stunt training. Either in work or in his new night job, Drake had managed to bridge the gap between the theoretical and the literal. And while he was smaller than Jim here, his blows packed a punch.

Beaks was scrabbling on the floor, trying and failing to free himself from the table he had knocked into, soaked in beer and wild eyed. Donald thought he was whimpering.

Jim managed to throw the bouncer off, but the bat connected to his knees and he went down with a grunt, thrashing. He caught Drake in the gut, throwing him off onto the ground, but another patron took the opportunity to smash a chair on the falcon's head, and he dropped to the floor with a groan.

Bar fights weren't organized. Or fair. Jim's nice, formal training fell to a few chaotic people and a baseball bat. Donald was almost disappointed; he felt awake, *alive,* and his hands all but trembled to throw another punch.

Donald knelt on the man's shoulders, while Drake held one arm and the bartender held the other, and the bouncer took the moment to

grab Beaks by the collar and drag him towards the door.

"Wait, wait, I- Seriously?! I'll buy a drink if it means that much to you-!" He was insisting, feet dragging on the floor, shirt soaked in someone's drink, flapping his arms instead of doing anything useful like grabbing her arm.

"No ID, no entry, no purchase," the bouncer grunted, scowling. "And that was *before* you hit me. Now you get to wait in the parking lot for the cops."

"Wait, *cops?"* Beaks demanded, but at that point she had reached the door and shoved through it, so they couldn't hear the rest of the conversation as the door swung shut with a muted thud.

There was silence as they all looked at each other, then at Jim, still dazed on the ground.

"So… do we bring him outside to wait, or…?" Drake asked, panting, looking between Donald and the bartender. Drake had blood dribbling from a cut on his eyebrow. Donald could feel his eye swelling already.

The bartender (and Donald hated that he didn't know *his* name either) shrugged, not releasing his grip on the eagle's arm.

"He's a big guy," Bartender guy said, "we'd have to drag him."

"I could carry him," Donald said absently, leaning back to eye the width of Jim's shoulders. Sure, he would look ridiculous, but if he cared about that, he would have spontaneously combusted from

embarrassment years ago.

A snort of laughter.

“I think he’s a bit big for you,” one of the other bar patrons snorted, shoulders shaking. Donald’s eyes narrowed.

“Wanna bet?”

A few quips, one handshake and a ‘gentle’ kick to make sure Jim was still out for the count, and Donald was rolling him over and grabbing under the falcon’s arm and knee while the crowd cheered and jeered, and Drake watched him with speculative eyes.

Donald grunted, re-positioned his arms. Jim didn’t move except to moan a bit.

“Alright, you probably shouldn’t strain yourself-” the server from earlier said uneasily, but Donald had found the right grip, and he *heaved.*

He stood, hauling Jim over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry, and rolled his neck as he settled the weight. The crowd fell silent, before Drake let out a *whoop,* and the bar erupted into cheering. Drake was even clapping wildly, hamming it up; he looked flushed and excited, which Donald could agree with. Nothing like a fight to get the blood pumping.

Donald couldn’t help his smug grin, but he didn’t pause to gloat too much; Jim was still heavy, and more importantly was still loopy and not moving. Since that could change at any moment, he wanted to get

this done.

The server rushed to get the door for him, and he nodded his thanks as he shuffled, sideways, through the entrance.

“Thanks,” he grunted when he was through. “What’s your name, by the way?”

“Kelli,” she replied, eyeing the falcon on his shoulders dubiously. “Guy with the bat was Cade, and that badass holding the twerp is Mel.”

The bouncer, now known as Mel, stared as he walked over to her. She was still holding Beaks by the collar.

“Um,” Beaks said intelligently, eyes bulging just a bit. He was holding up his arm oddly, like he’d hurt it at some point, but he’d stopped whatever whining he was doing to stare.

“Don’t suppose you’re looking for a job?” He continued, because apparently he had no *shame.* Donald seriously considered dropping his prisoner on top of the smug parrot, but opted to set the falcon down on the ground instead. He was nice enough to make sure Jim’s head didn’t bounce on the pavement. The falcon didn't move as he landed.

He should probably be checked for a concussion.

“No, seriously, I would totally hire you, 100% forgiveness for all of this B.S.” Beaks rambled while Donald peeled Jim’s eyelids back and checked with a flashlight. Jim waved a hand lazily at the light, but his pupils reacted normally, so he should be fine.

“Do you ever *shut up?”* Donald demanded, but he didn’t bother listening to whatever Beaks replied with. It was not, in fact, the sound of him shutting up, so he didn’t care.

“Cops’ll be here in a minute or two,” Mel said tiredly. Beaks twisted to stare at her.

“Wait, you seriously called the cops? Come on, for *what?”*

Her glare could probably have lit Beaks on fire.

“You and your guard shoved your way in after I *told* you you weren’t welcome, refused to show I.D., harassed a guy that said you followed him from *Duckburg,* started a barfight, pissed me off, frankly, *and-* ” and here she leaned in close, until they were nose to beak. “*Don’t* call me sweetie.”

It was probably for the best that a cop car showed up at that point. Good for Beaks anyway, the parrot looked like he was about to cry.

The officer looked bored and irritated, while Mel explained what had happened. He glanced at Beaks briefly, then at Donald’s swelling eye. Jim got a longer look, while the falcon slowly sat up, rubbing his head.

“Alright, alright, I’ll let you off with a warning if you get going,” the officer told Beaks with disinterest, checking his watch. “No need to write anything up if nobody got hurt.” He pointedly didn’t look closely at Jim, who had managed to get to his feet but was clearly wobbly.

“Seriously! He attacked me!” Beaks protested, pointing at Donald. Donald scowled, crossing his arms, while Beaks held up his wrist. “He tried to break my wrist!”

“Don’t look broken to me,” the cop replied. Mel stifled a snort.

“Yeah, I *said* almost. He shoved my chair *and* broke my phone!”

“I pushed it out of my face,” Donald said, though he doubted the cop really cared, “and he dropped it.”

“Uh, no, that isn’t-”

“Look, I’m not bringing anyone in for a broken phone and a little push, so unless you want a drunk and disorderly, I suggest you and your friend clear out,” the cop cut him off with an annoyed look and an exaggerated sniff. Beaks looked like he was in the middle of a crisis, and his face was going red fast.

“Excuse me?! I’m not drunk! They wouldn’t even serve me!”

“You refused to provide ID when I asked,” Mel reminded him, apparently amused.

“Cause I didn’t want people asking for, like, my autograph or-”

“Or a selfie?” Donald asked innocently. The joke went over Beaks’

head, since he nodded enthusiastically, but Jim snorted a startled laugh.

“This isn’t a joke, it’s the law.” The cop snapped, teeth clenched. “Now get going, or you get to visit the local precinct and we’ll get your ‘selfie’ and fingerprints to boot. And you, weird voice guy,” he continued, “you can go.”

Donald hesitated for half a second, before he went gratefully. Last thing he wanted to deal with was a police interview, honestly, even if he was dying to know how this would go. He could still hear Beaks arguing as he walked across the parking lot.

Drake was waiting just outside the bar, lingering by the door with a tense expression.

“Worth sticking around, you think?” Donald asked, leaning against the wall for a moment instead of going in. “All of… this probably scared off your friend.”

Drake considered him, then glanced back at the bar.

“Well,” he said, looking conflicted, “we should at least finish our drinks? To not look too suspicious? But yeah, tonight was probably a bust. Nobody is going to be interested in recruiting with a cop stopping by tonight.”

Donald agreed, and he also agreed that it might gain more attention to leave right this second, so he led the way back inside.

Besides, he thought they deserved to finish their drinks. Or get

another one, in his case, considering that bottle was now smashed glass in Jim's hair and all over the floor.

The tables had been turned back up, spilled drinks wiped away and every single person was back where they had been before. It was like it had never happened, except for the shattered phone sitting on the bar face down. There were buzzing sounds coming from it that implied that the stream might still be going.

The first acknowledgement that anything had happened came when Donald met the eyes of the man that had bet he couldn't lift Jim (which had been silly; he was still smaller than Launchpad, after all), who nodded with respect and silently handed him a folded, wrinkled twenty.

"That guy getting arrested?" He asked gruffly. Donald waggled a hand.

"He's pissing off the cop pretty bad, but he's rich, so fifty fifty shot," Donald replied.

"Leaning towards him getting himself detained and released when they run his ID, personally," Drake added. His eyes darted briefly to the dartboards, but their target had, in fact, slipped out during the earlier fight or right after. Not shocking, but it meant they had no other reason to stay besides maintaining a cover. Stick around long enough that people weren't paying much attention to them, then slip out and hope Drake could follow up later for more information. They'd already gained some attention, but at least it wasn't related to hero work, so…

Just finish their drinks, then they could slip out.

Donald wanted it known that he had *no* idea how this had happened. The guy that he'd bet with insisted on buying him a round since he'd won their bet. Sure, they'd already settled up, but Donald had been *so* impressive, he had to reward that!

He and Drake had accepted. Why not?

Then a few others that had been watching picked up the next few, and well, Donald had a decent tolerance, it would be fine, right? He didn't *need* to be physically in the office tomorrow anyway, if it came down to it.

Next thing he knew, Drake was casually asking exactly how much *could* he lift, and someone dragged a bench out, and now he was holding the thing above his head, with Drake and Kelli seated on either end. Kelli was giggling, clinging to the bench with both hands, despite Donald doing his best to keep it steady. It didn't help that Drake was clearly leaning into it, shifting back and forth and asking if they could get another person to *jump* onto the center.

"If you do that, I'm sending you the hospital bill," Donald grumbled, but in truth, he wasn't sure if he could handle a third person or not. Maybe a small one? Nobody at the bar, in any case.

Absently, he reached out to grab his drink, only realizing what he'd done when everyone near him went quiet.

"You can do that with *one hand?!"*

Donald downed the drink in one long pull. He should have stayed home, he thought, but his cheeks hurt from laughing, and his chest

was warm.

Eventually, people lost interest (or enough people lost money betting that they had to leave and lick their wounds), and Donald stumbled back to their long abandoned table in the corner, rolling his shoulders. Drake followed, teetering in a way that looked too smooth, too rehearsed, grinning all the while.

What an ass.

“Not a very productive night,” Donald observed, settling in his seat. It was very late now, and he regretted not getting something more substantial to eat while the kitchen was open. The beer felt unpleasant in his gut.

“Maybe not,” Drake acknowledged, “but we did make some friends. Which gives us a plausible reason to come back.”

He shoved the few remaining pickles over; they were stone cold and soggy now, but Donald tossed the whole basket into his mouth with a grimace anyway. It was something at least.

Then he squinted at Drake.

“Did you drive here?”

Drake hadn’t been drinking as much as Donald had, but he’d also not really eaten either.

“I should be asking *you* that!” Drake pointed out, which, yeah that was fair, but Donald was more than capable of finding somewhere to sleep it off.

Like a rooftop. He *did* still have Paperinik’s cape in his car, he could use that as a blanket!

Probably not something he should say out loud.

Since apparently *neither* of them should be driving, and their mark was long gone, they opted to find a 24 hour diner to sober up instead. Their server, Pam, looked highly judgemental of them as they stumbled in, snorting with laughter, and huffed when they both ordered coffee. Though she may have just been irritated that they interrupted her reading time, since they were the only customers in the building. The cook peered at them through the open order window, the grill sizzling ominously.

“Is it sad that I would have tripped over that rug completely sober too?” Donald asked his mug. Drake made a wheezing sound of potential agreement, having burnt his tongue the moment the coffee hit their table.

“So when do you want to circle back? Give it a few days, or…?” Donald asked, trying to focus. They hadn’t seen anyone approach the guy they’d been watching, in the limited amount of time they’d been there. It could have been a slow night. It could mean they had the wrong guy. It *probably* meant that anyone that they might have been able to get information from was scared off by the cops and attention.

“Supposedly he’s only there once a week or so, to stay below the radar,” Drake explained, leaning one one arm and tilting slowly to the side. He seemed unaware of his slow failure to fight gravity. “I’ll come back in a few days, but I’m thinking about just planting a camera or

staking out the building instead."

"Hmm…" Donald replied. One more thing to do. One more avenue to explore that might just go *nowhere*.

Pam circled back for their order, while they quietly contemplated the evening. Mostly, Donald was irritated. Oh, he'd had fun, it was nice to see Drake and all, but they'd accomplished basically nothing. He'd apparently caught Mark Beaks attention just from a video, and he had no earthly clue how he'd avoided getting dragged into the police station.

And while he doubted anyone in the bar had thought 'wow, those two people fighting the scrawny rich kid and his bodyguard are probably secretly superheroes!', the chaos and attention may have driven off their mark. Even if he was recruiting for the Blot, he may easily move to another bar. Or this could be a false lead, and he was just hiring for something else. Or not hiring at all!

"Donald?" Drake drew him out of his thoughts. "You alright?"

"Just tired," he grunted, rolling his shoulders. He'd probably be sore later, but for now he was just a bit stiff. Drake eyed his shoulders as he moved.

"I can imagine," he said slowly. "How much *can* you lift anyway?"

Donald shrugged.

"No idea."

“Wait, really? You’re not going into the gym or something? Weight training?”

Donald shook his head.

“How.” Drake asked, or more demanded, gesturing at him with both hands. “You literally just held a bench *and two fully grown people* over your head! One handed! You looked like a circus performer!”

Donald was… at least 60% certain that he had done that for a circus act at some point. Maybe a carnival. Or had that been a dream…?

He shrugged. He didn’t go to a gym, his life was just like this. If he couldn’t carry an injured family member/co-worker/fellow hero away if needed, who would? It wasn’t like *Scrooge* could do it. Launchpad could probably carry them all easily enough, but what if he was the one injured?

“Seriously?”

“Yup,” he answered. Drake didn’t seem very pleased by his answer.

“Dang. Was hoping I could get some advice on a workout regime. That was seriously impressive!”

“Speaking of that, how much money did you make betting on me?” Donald asked casually, leaning back in his seat. Drake’s eyes went wide for just a moment before he recovered, but it was too late.

“Ah! I wouldn't- I mean, I didn’t-” He spluttered, and Donald couldn’t help it, he burst into slightly hysterical laughter.

“You’re a jerk,” Drake grumbled, face slightly flushed, but he was grinning as well.

Pam gave them another judgy look from behind the counter.

Donald had ordered a burger and fries, Drake an omelet, and they fell to silence as they stuffed their faces when it finally arrived. Pam went back to her book, and old pop songs played from scratchy speakers. Donald’s free hand traced a patched part of the vinyl seat, nails scraping over the rougher texture over and over and over as he dipped fries into ketchup mechanically.

His chest felt warm. In the bar he’d put that down to the drinks, the heat, the fact that he was holding a lot of weight up. On the walk here he’d guessed he was just flushed, or the beer wasn't settling right without food in his stomach. Now, sitting here and sobering up by the minute, he admitted to himself that it was clearly his amulet.

The amulet that allowed him, Panchito and José to send basic feelings and share some magic in an emergency. They couldn’t send any worded messages, just emotions, and right now Donald was getting growing concern from Panchito’s warm ruby red. José felt too far away to get anything, he was probably out of town, but Panchito felt close.

Too close to still be in New Quackmore, in fact. Was he getting closer…?

“Donald?”

Donald twisted to look out the windows, but the glare of the lights inside rendered the glass as useful as a brick wall. His hand tapped against the amulet, a slow and steady beat. *I’m fine. I’m fine. I’m fine.*

There was no response. No reaction. Just the faintest breath of smoky air and a growing point of warmth that was definitely moving closer.

Why was Panchito coming here? Was there an emergency? What was he even doing in St. Canard, *Panchito didn’t have a car-*

“Donald!”

He could see some headlights passing, but they didn’t slow down.

Had he missed something? Xandra hadn’t contacted him for anything Caballero related in *years* . His family should still be in Duckburg, he hadn’t gotten any Kingdom Hearts messages, what else could it *be?*

A hand on his arm, Donald spun wildly to face-

Drake. He was still in the diner. His half-eaten meal was cooling on the table, a fresh mug of coffee steaming next to it.

“Jeez, lost you for a sec. Are you alright?” Despite how casual his words were, he looked worried. Donald didn’t know what his face looked like.

“Don?”

He blinked painfully dry eyes, looking back towards the window. There were no lights now, it was black and useless again, but he could feel the heat growing, and it was properly hot now, not just warm. Whatever was happening, Panchito was feeling something *strong*. Fear? Worry?

… Anger?

“You’re scaring me,” Drake said, and Donald forced a shuddering breath.

“Have I introduced you to Panchito yet?” He asked, like there was a chance he’d forgotten. Drake blinked at him, baffled, shaking his head slowly.

“Uh- if that’s some code I should know-”

“You’re about to meet him,” Donald interrupted, and clearly Panchito’s timing hadn’t suffered in the past decade, because that was the moment the diner door swung open with a violent ring of the bell, and revealed a panting rooster.

Donald gave him a tired, half-hearted wave, and braced himself for a crisis.

“Donal’! You got in a fight *without me?”*

Why do you have a whip with you?

“Uh…” Donald said intelligently. “I didn’t mean to?”

Panchito huffed dramatically, stomping over and shoving into Donald’s side so he could sit in the booth. Donald moved enough for him to have space, but was entirely unsurprised when Panchito settled against his side anyway, throwing an arm over his shoulder.

“A *fight.* And you didn’t call, you didn’t *text,* you could have sent a smoke signal at least!” Panchito whined in his ear, stealing a few fries as he did. Donald rolled his eyes, feeling his heartbeat calming, and slid his plate over.

Drake was staring, looking like he hadn’t entirely processed what just happened. Then his face slid to *mischief*.

“That’s not all,” Drake said in a conspiratorial tone. Panchito zeroed in on him, leaning forward, dragging Donald with him.

“What else? Tell me, er…?” Panchito demanded, before pausing, squinting at him.

“Drake Mallard,” Drake said, holding out his hand. Panchito lit up, grabbing his hand and pumping it several times, grinning.

“Ah, yes, Donal’ has mentioned you! I am Panchito Romero Miguel Junipero Francisco Quintero Gonzalez Pistoles,” Panchito replied enthusiastically, still shaking Drake’s hand. Drake blinked, looking a bit rattled. Probably the shaking.

“Now, what did he do without so much as texting his Panchito?”

“Well, for starters, he bet a fellow he couldn’t carry the guy we were fighting out of the bar,” Drake told him, while Donald resolutely ignored them both and continued drinking his coffee. In the reflection of the dark window, he could see Pam eyeing their table. The image was too blurry to make out her expression, but Donald imagined it was even more irritated that her evening had been interrupted.

“Oh?”

“Which he managed without any *effort,* by the way. Just tossed him over his shoulder like a sack of flour!”

A well timed dramatic gasp; Panchito was always an enthusiastic audience.

“And *then,* when we got back inside, he did this whole strongman routine and lifted me and a waitress up on a bench!”

“No!”

“One handed!”

“And I *missed it?!”*

Donald regretted letting these two ever meet. Maybe if he held very

still, they would forget he was here?

Panchito was shaking his shoulder to get his attention, so that plan was out. New plan, distract them and run.

“Donal’! You did not think to wait for me! I love to see your muscles!”

“I’m wearing sleeves,” Donald pointed out absently, “so you wouldn’t have seen them anyway.”

Panchito scoffed. He was warm against Donald’s side.

“That is not the point,” he pouted, but he was clearly being playful instead of genuinely upset.

Pam chose that moment to circle by with a coffee refill, eyeing Panchito suspiciously and asking if he wanted anything. She looked honestly relieved when he only asked for water.

“How did you know what happened anyway? Didn't think Beaks got Donald or I on camera, did someone post a video?” Drake asked absently, sipping his coffee. Donald felt a chill roll over his skin; if *another* video of him was going around, he was going to start wearing a mask every time he left the house.

Beside him, Panchito went oddly stiff, and his hand squeezed Donald’s tight. Donald glanced over; Panchito’s spare hand tapped absently at his chest.

No, not his chest. The Caballeros amulet. Pulses of worried warmth washed over Donald in time.

Donald paused, then fished his own amulet out. It glowed very faintly in his hands, but it could easily be a trick of the light. He waited until Drake noticed it, eyes darting between the blue jewel to Panchito's hand, before he tucked it away again.

"I'm guessing you caught something I was projecting and came to check?" He asked, glancing casually at Panchito, who had relaxed; had Donald not told them that Drake knew about the magic thing already?

Well, he hadn't mentioned the amulets, he supposed, that had been something he told *Fenton,* but it wasn't that much more information.

Really.

Probably, anyway.

"Ah, yes, that was it. I was already in the taxi when you calmed down, but you were not responding! And I was already here, so." Panchito said with a decisive nod. He looked calm, but the emotions Donald could feel, now that he was paying attention, were still a bit jittery and anxious.

Donald squeezed his hand back.

Drake was squinting at them with interest, leaning forward.

“You’ve got, what, a magical distress signal on you? That’s pretty neat,” Drake replied after a moment, his expression thoughtful.

“It is! Though they work better now that we are back in the same country,” Panchito replied cheerfully. “We could barely feel each other when we were so far apart!”

Which had been awful, honestly. He’d gotten used to it eventually, they all had, but it had not been an enjoyable process. Donald had taken to shielding most of the time because what he *could* get was so much worse than feeling nothing.

He’d been doing that less, lately, but it was easy to fall into old habits. He must have slipped up briefly during the fight, then gone back to normal, which was probably why Panchito was so frantic. Getting a distress signal and no follow up?

Troubling.

Donald leaned further into Panchito’s side with a sigh. He was tired, now, the alcohol fading out and exhaustion sliding in. The coffee was taking the edge off, but only just, and Panchito was warm and comforting.

And insane; he could have *called.*

Donald dozed off, or so he assumed, because he blinked his eyes open to Panchito gently shaking his shoulder, murmuring that they needed to get to a proper bed.

“Hammock,” Donald grumbled instinctively, and Panchito chuckled.

Donald groaned to himself, rubbing his eyes, and slid out of the booth, gesturing vaguely towards the bathroom in lieu of speaking.

A few other people had come into the diner while he’d been dozing. Most were sitting quietly alone, one group of three was chattering away in a corner booth. He must have really been out of it to have missed so many people coming in, Donald mused as he splashed cold water on his face.

Drake and Panchito were still talking when he came back out, about fútbol of all things (apparently Drake supported Argentina because he’d lived there for a while, which was interesting), and they were playfully arguing about a game Donald couldn’t recall watching or hearing about. Despite his exhaustion, he felt a fond smile tug at his lips. Panchito could find common ground with everyone he met. It was one of the things Donald loved about him.

“Ah, Donal’! So, I was thinking I could come back to the boat with you? I, ah, took a taxi here,” Panchito said with a sheepish grin as Donald rejoined them, shrugging on his coat. Donald paused, peering at him with a bemused expression.

“What was your plan if I said no?” He asked. Panchito grinned, clearly hearing the implicit ‘yes’ in that, and shrugged.

“Another taxi? Walking? I would have found a solution. But even if I did have a plan, I think perhaps I should drive. You look exhausted, cariño,” he continued, leaning a bit closer and speaking softly. Donald huffed, but he couldn’t deny it.

“Will you be alright?” He asked Drake instead of responding directly.

Drake nodded, tugging on a scarf.

"Yeah, I didn't have much to drink, so I'm more than sober enough to drive. Besides, I don't live far."

"Text me that you made it home alive," Donald ordered, before he could catch the words, and winced, feeling his face go warm. Drake snorted a surprised laugh.

"Sure, I can do that," he promised. He looked oddly touched, actually.

They had to walk back to the bar's small parking lot, which was nearly empty now. Donald glanced around for something that looked like Beaks had driven it, wary that he might have stuck around, but didn't see anything that he thought fit the bill. Which, come to think of it, how had he even followed Donald here? Had he raced out of the cafe *just* to catch him?

And once the thought crossed his mind, it ate at him. Did he think that Beaks had given up entirely? The parrot had been pretty determined, just to get a photo! Or more likely because he didn't like being told 'no.'

And Donald's car *had* been sitting here unoccupied for several hours. Sure, his tires were still there, Beaks probably didn't have a knife to slash them with (or it hadn't even occurred to him), but he couldn't shake the idea that he might have done *something,* and checked the car over. Drake and Panchito were still chatting about a game, and it only took a minute.

He expected nothing. To find that he was entirely too paranoid. Maybe to find a scratch he hadn't noticed before, maybe something written in dust on the fender, but nothing actually concerning.

So finding the tracker under his rear bumper was almost a surprise. The second one stuck to the inside of his hood even more so. He pulled himself to his feet and away, staring at his hands.

They were such innocuous looking things. Small plastic shapes, one with a built-in magnet. Easy to completely disregard, if you didn't know what they were.

They didn't match. That was what was sticking with him right now, staring into his hand. Even if one *had* been Beaks' doing, both seemed… unlikely. Especially considering one of them looked similar to an Airtag, but the other was a more professional grade.

Why were there *two?*

"Donald? What's that?"

Drake was peering over his shoulder curiously. Donald almost closed his hand, but there wasn't much point in it, so he stopped. Panchito slid over to his side.

"A tracking device?" Drake continued, face pulling into a frown. Donald nodded.

Panchito glanced at Donald. He knew about Donald being a spy, but he didn't know that *Drake* didn't know that, and Drake wouldn't know that *Panchito* didn't know about him being Paperinik.

Some day, he really needed to find a way of dealing with this. In a

way that didn't just mean lying.

"One was probably Beaks," Donald said in the most reasonable tone he could muster, which came out as dead inside. "Trying to decide if the second one is someone trying to find PK or if it's related to Scrooge somehow."

He'd visited Ducklair Tower. He'd *visited Uno's home.* Not to mention SHUSH headquarters!

Donald took a breath. Panchito leaned against his side. Drake made a face, eyeing the trackers. His face felt cold, like all the blood had run out of it, and his outstretched hand trembled just slightly.

Ducklair Tower was a large building, and there were a lot of other businesses on the other floors; it shouldn't tip anyone off that there was anything unusual. He had worked there when he was younger, too, he had non-hero reasons to potentially visit.

And the SHUSH building looked like a normal office building. That was the *point* of it. He needed to relax.

First thing first. As much as he wanted to bring the trackers in to be looked at, he didn't want to give whoever had placed them any more information than they already had, especially if one was from Beaks. He didn't want the parrot knowing where he worked. Or lived, for that matter. Which meant blocking them from transmitting anything else.

If he was more tech savvy, he could probably deactivate them or temporarily stop the signal. That would let him bring them both to SHUSH to look over. But he wasn't, so that left him with two options. Either he crushed them both, or…

He glanced around. There were a few other cars in the parking lot, and a bus stop around the corner.

"We need to get rid of these," Donald said to himself, juggling the two small disks in his hand. If he broke them, whoever had placed them would know he found them; Beaks he hoped would give up the chase at that point, if one was from him. As to the other, the less information they had, the better. Which meant hiding how much time (and research) had been wasted because the trackers weren't with Donald anymore; anything recorded after he got rid of it would muddy the waters of useful information.

"Oh, what if we give them to a raccoon?" Panchito suggested, pointing at a dumpster in the alley. Donald squinted into the darkness, and sure enough, there was a beady-eyed raccoon peering back at them. It hissed when their eyes met.

"I'm not wrestling a raccoon," Donald replied, staring at the critter. "I'm already going to have a black eye."

Unless he healed it. Which, come to think of it, he had no reason not to do, nobody had seen him with it (that didn't know he could heal it, anyway), but he should probably get some sleep first.

"I'll do it!"

"Pancho, *no.* "

Donald considered his options with a scowl. Despite his protests, an animal wasn't the *worst* idea. It just almost guaranteed injury. If the trackers stopped moving for too long, whoever had planted them

might realize he'd found them.

But he couldn't attach them to another car; if it was someone tracking PK, or even just Donald, it might be dangerous for the tracker to be attached to someone else. He couldn't stomach the idea of someone else getting roped into his business, especially some innocent bystander.

"I could offload them onto a bus?" Drake offered, pointing out the bus stop. "Next one comes by in a half hour, could just chuck them on the roof of it."

Donald pursed his beak. It would at least keep them moving, but…

"You aren't just going to wait here for half an hour," he pointed out. "You need to get home." Drake hesitated at that, looking torn. Gosalyn was probably waiting for him; Donald hoped she wasn't sitting awake, worried about her dad.

"What about a police car?" Panchito suggested, pointing across the street. Donald blinked, squinting over.

Sure enough, there was a cruiser parked there, abandoned. An off-duty officer, maybe?

"I could get it stuck to the lights!" Panchito continued cheerfully. Drake looked at him doubtfully.

"What, from here? Cause they aren't going to be too happy if you get that close," he argued, and Panchito gave him a cheerfully smug look. Donald sighed, and held out the trackers.

“Of course I can! I am an expert marksman!” Panchito enthused, and he pulled out his whip. Drake hopped back a step in surprise.

“With a *whip?!”*

“Of course! I trained with experts for many years with my whip!”

Donald had seen this trick, but it never failed to be impressive. Panchito flicked the whip a few times, then stepped back from Donald to give himself room.

The whip flicked out with a *crack!* and took the two plastic disks from his hand. A second *crack!* and the whip darted across the street to the cruiser.

If it was anyone else, literally anyone else, Donald would be bleeding from the palm, the trackers destroyed and the siren and lights on the car shattered. Instead, Donald only felt the lightest brush against his palm, and there was only the slightest clack of plastic as the whip flicked the small pieces into place on the roof of the cruiser.

Panchito flicked the whip again, then rolled it back and away. He was radiating pleasure, a cat that got the cream, the canary, and a goldfish for its trouble, and he turned that expression on Drake with a flourishing bow. Drake gave him a grudging clap, but he couldn’t hide the astonished look quite fast enough.

“There, you see? As I said,” Panchito said with a smirk. Drake grumbled.

“Alright, that was impressive,” he admitted, like it had to be dragged from his throat. Panchito laughed.

Donald took a deep breath. He still felt wound tight, a spring just waiting to pull loose and destroy the delicate gears and wheels of his life. The Blot, SHUSH, PK, everything kept getting bigger and more complicated. How had he had *free time* when he rejoined SHUSH?

Not, he considered, watching Drake scoff and point at some new target for Panchito to hit, that it was all bad. He’d missed having friends, having his partners. Having other adults around, ones that he could actually *talk* to, instead of the distant other parents from school and the Junior Woodchucks.

Donald took another breath, a more settled one this time. Then he glanced at his watch and winced. A more active social life was nice, but he had work in the morning.

Panchito insisted on driving them. Donald should not be charmed by his insistence; he was more than able to drive at this point, the anxiety had woken him up. But Panchito took the driver's seat with a disarming grin until Donald scoffed and handed over the keys.

So he sat in the passenger seat of his own car, leaning his head against the glass, while Panchito absently whistled as they drove home. The car was quiet; Donald had turned the radio off during the drive here, annoyed by the scratchy noise and unwilling to find another station, so there was only the sound of the engine.

Panchito’s fingers tapped a beat against the wheel. His face was calm, content.

Donald swallowed.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, "I didn't mean to scare you."

Panchito hummed an inquisitive note.

"I'm just- used to blocking the amulet, after the last few- well. I didn't realize you were worried until you were close. You were driving for a while, and you had to be-" Donald cut himself off.

"I was," Panchito agreed anyway. He knew how that sentence would end. His eyes stayed on the road.

"But I feel that you aren't understanding why I was afraid," he continued after a moment, eyes sliding over for a moment. Just a brief glimpse of dark eyes and a conflicted expression.

"I-" Donald started, but he didn't know how to continue. *Why* Panchito was afraid? Because Donald could have been…

Could have been what?

"Donal', you did not respond for hours. While I got a very irritated driver to take me all over the city looking for you! What is the *point* of the amulets if we do not use them?!"

Donald winced, head bumping against the glass. He knew that, he *knew,* but it had been many years since anyone had needed to be told that *Donald* was okay. He'd forgotten, that was all, eleven years was

more than enough time to break a habit of checking in.

Panchito's face, in the corner of his eye, did some complicated movement before he sighed, shoulders slumping.

"Donal', amor, you live a dangerous life. One that I do not fully understand. I am afraid that someday, you will not come back from one of your adventures, and we may never know. If you are with your familia, they would at least tell us if you could not. But your other work may not.

"So please, for my sake, for José's sake, please do not shut us out like this. I know you have your secrets, I understand, but…"

"I will," Donald promised without a thought, sitting back up. "I promise Pancho, I didn't *mean* to shut you out, I don't want you to be scared like that!"

"You are focusing on *me* again!" Panchito snapped, fingers clenching around the steering wheel. "I'm worried about *you.* I worry that you keep putting others ahead of yourself, and one day… one day that might be the last time. You have the amulet, but it helps no-one if you refuse to use it if you are in trouble!

"I do not think I will survive if we should lose you, Donal'. I am not asking you to give up your dangers, that would be truly unreasonable for us all, but I am asking that you not take the weight of the world on your shoulders. You have your friends, and your allies, and your us, but we cannot help you if you do not *ask.* "

Panchito sighed all at once, deflated like the words had been all that was holding him up.

Donald felt heavy, as though Panchito's accusation of holding up the world was literal. He couldn't ask others to be involved, couldn't drag others into his problems-

But. Darkwing was already involved. So was Gizmoduck. And SHUSH. Bentina, 330, Gyro in a way. He *did* have allies.

And he didn't want to scare Panchito again.

Donald breathed out, and loosened his grip on the amulet connection.

Whereas before he only felt a vague warmth and worry, now he was flooded by concern and love and fear, enough to drown in. He felt it wash over him, a wave of *heat* , coating every inch of his feathers. It was overwhelming.

He relaxed, letting it all settle within him, warming him from the inside out. Too hot, too hot, and then just comfortingly warm, like settling into a soothing bath. It felt like coming home.

Panchito went stiff, then relaxed all at once. He smiled at the steering wheel.

"Gracias, Donal'."

Breakfast is the Only Meal Gladstone eats, apparently

His phone went off long before they reached home, confirming Drake had made it safely. With that concern out of the way, Donald was asleep the moment his head hit the pillow, only managing a grunted invitation for Panchito to join him before he was gone. His hammock wasn't sized for several people anymore (several adults anyway), but they made it work.

He woke to red feathers in his mouth, and fingers running through his hair. He couldn't physically get closer, but he tried, nuzzling in while Panchito chuckled gently.

They both needed to get up. He needed to get to work, Panchito probably needed to get home to prepare for his dinner shift. Hell, Panchito didn't even have a *car,* Donald should offer to drive him home…

But he was so *tired,* even now, and it wasn't like he couldn't be a bit late to work. The only thing he wanted to do was chase down the scientist angle while he was between major missions; other facilities were looking into the remaining FOWL bases, the faces from the prison videos, the names from the auction list… so many moving pieces. Plus he needed to think about the trackers from yesterday. But Panchito had been right, more so than he'd realized. There were a lot of people involved with the investigation, and Donald needed to remember he wasn't doing this alone.

He sighed, and stayed where he was. A few more minutes, he could take a few more minutes before he jumped back into the thick of things.

Five more minutes, at least.

There was a tentative knock on the front door.

“Donald?”

Gladstone. Donald groaned and shifted so he was lying on his back, still entwined with Panchito. Above him, a chuckle. He huffed, ignoring both the voice of his cousin and the rooster above him for a moment, before he rolled free of the hammock. He went tumbling to the floor, but Panchito managed to keep upright in the hammock, letting out a startled squawk.

Donald stumbled out of the room, still wearing yesterday’s rumpled, creased button down, yawning. Gladstone was standing at the front door, coffee in each hand. He looked mildly startled at Donald’s appearance, which was an odd enough reaction that Donald reflexively looked down.

His shirt was wrinkled beyond repair, sure, but it wasn’t stained or anything; he couldn’t see anything worth reacting to, so he looked back up at his cousin.

Who wasn’t actually looking at him; he was looking over Donald’s shoulder at Panchito, who had trailed after him, hat crookedly affixed to his head. His chin landed on Donald’s shoulder gently.

“Glad, you’ve met Panchito, right?” Donald asked without inflection, shuffling backwards until Panchito caught the hint and moved so they could go to the kitchen. Gladstone made a funny choking noise behind them.

“Yeah, at your commencement, I think. Where’s José? Or was this,

like, a two person date? I don't know how it works," Gladstone asked, stumbling after them, while Donald eyed him with mild confusion. He didn't think he'd seen Gladstone this off-kilter in a while. He took the opportunity to steal the coffee in his cousin's hand.

Panchito laughed, where he was rummaging in Donald's fridge.

"You say that like this was planned!" He crowed, emerging with a stack of ingredients that were probably for omelets, but with Panchito it was hard to tell. Donald glanced at the clock, but it was still early enough to make it to work at a reasonable hour.

Probably.

Hell, what were they going to do, *fire* him?

He sipped at his coffee. Too sweet, probably Gladstone's.

"Impromptu sleepover, then?" Glad asked, recovering some of his usual casual attitude. He plopped down at the table with a grace Donald had envied most of his life. If he'd done the same thing, he probably would have punched straight through the wall.

"Something like that. We really need to plan some kind of double date with Launchpad and Drake, by the way, they've both asked me," Donald replied, glancing at Panchito, who nodded enthusiastically at the idea. Donald was slightly terrified of Launchpad ' *has crashed every single vehicle he's ever driven* ' McQuack and Panchito ' *has jumped out of moving planes without a parachute multiple time* s' Pistoles actually meeting, but on the other hand…

Nope, he had nothing, he would live in fear until the inevitable meeting. Maybe they should plan that date somewhere remote to limit the eventual collateral damage.

Like Antarctica. Or the surface of the Moon.

Donald took another sip. José wouldn't help, he'd find the whole thing charming. And based on how well Drake and Panchito had been getting along, Donald could either try to keep them all corralled, or join the madness.

Panchito was making omelets, and had clearly sliced up mango to go inside them. Donald didn't even remember buying mangoes.

Meh. Madness would be more fun.

Gladstone was watching with something resembling fascination.

"I heard you had a run-in with Mark Beaks, too," he added, when Donald caught his gaze. Donald winced, spilling a splash of coffee onto his shirt. He swore.

"Don't tell me he posted the video of that fight," Donald grumbled as he tossed his shirt off; he'd need to soak it if he wanted it to survive without being stained, but even so he wasn't holding out hope. Coffee was tricky for the average person to remove, but Donald? He might as well burn it.

Still, he was stubborn, so he stomped off to soak it anyway, grabbing a clean shirt as he came back.

“If it makes you feel better, you’re not directly in it, besides a blurry shot or two before the phone goes flying,” Gladstone replied as he came back, buttoning the new shirt. “Beaks kept it pointed at his face most of the time, you can’t even see the bar. I just recognized your voice.”

“It *is* unique, Donal’,” Panchito agreed cheerfully. Donald nodded glumly. At least this time most people wouldn’t know who he was, but he was *very* tired of people plastering his face all over the internet.

“Most of the comments and whatnot I read were people wondering what Beaks was even *doing,* it’s not his usual M.O. to- you know, not sure what his goal was. But yeah, apparently it was weird, and even some of his fans were turned off by it. And, hey, good news, a bunch of people took down the videos of you at the airport? I guess folks felt bad that you got outed by that,” Glad added with a grin, leaning back in his seat.

That was news to Donald, since he had been actively avoiding any more information on that part. Panchito looked less surprised, humming as he cooked; he spent more time online, so he had probably seen the trend already.

“I also saw that,” Pancho agreed. “I received a few messages apologizing as well! I think your comment made them feel guilty.”

“They *should* feel guilty,” Gladstone said, surprisingly passionate. “It’s pretty selfish to take pictures of other people just to get your five minutes of fame. And no offense, but you guys aren’t really famous enough to justify that stuff.”

“None taken,” Panchito replied easily.

“It did get it out in the open for the family,” Donald admitted, mostly to himself. As angry as the situation made him, it was *done.* No reaching out to all his friends, family and acquaintances, basically everyone knew now. There was some relief to that.

“Sure, sure, but I bet the kids would have liked a more personal approach. Louie even asked *me* about it, and he hasn’t really… well, kinda out of the blue, was all.”

“Huh, he didn’t mention that,” Donald replied absently, finishing the last of the coffee, now lukewarm.

“Well, I didn’t have much to tell. Thought you were dating back in college, but that was a while ago, you know?”

Panchito stopped humming. Donald went still.

“You knew?”

“Hm?” Gladstone was focused on fixing his lapels.

“You knew we were dating? In college?” Donald repeated, feeling oddly blank. Gladstone glanced up, shrugged, all casual grace.

“Eh, guessed it anyway. Never asked, figured you’d mention it if you wanted me to know,” he answered cheerfully.

Well. Well.

Donald blinked at his empty cup. His mind was blank. His fingers tapped on the table.

He'd wondered, when they had started dating, when they started traveling after college, when they'd planned to stay together permanently, how his family would react. It was natural, right? He'd figured Della would be accepting, in her obnoxious way. Would make her jokes that cut too sharp and too deep, always in the wrong spot, and they would find their way back to normal.

He'd never known what Scrooge would do. Acceptance crossed his mind when they were adventuring and working together like a well-oiled machine, rejection when they fought. Mostly he figured it would be awkward, hoped that it wouldn't break anything.

Gladstone had been an absent thought, an assumption that his cousin wouldn't really have a strong opinion, too much work. But he'd also assumed that he would have to tell him. That Gladstone wasn't paying close enough attention to spot anything.

(That Donald wasn't worth paying attention to)

"I don't think I was ready for anyone to know, back then," Donald admitted, a small burst of affectionate warmth spreading across his chest as Panchito resumed humming.

"Thanks," he added, "for not calling me out on it."

Gladstone gave him an easy smile, relaxed in his seat and calmer than

Donald had seen him in a while.

“Don’t mention it.”

Panchito slid omelets across the table, plopping into a third seat with a *fwump*.

The mango wasn’t bad. Weird, but not bad.

“So, uh, Donald,” Gladstone said after a moment, fork slicing the omelet into smaller and smaller pieces, “remember that party we were at a while back?”

It took Donald a minute to remember what he was talking about.

The auction. The power cells. The red haired woman, Mme Rouge.

The explosion.

But Gladstone wasn’t there for most of that, so he had to be referring to…

“Yeah?” He asked, looking up. Gladstone looked tense again, eyes darting to Panchito. Donald followed his gaze, then looked back.

“It’s fine. Panchito knows,” he said, which was mostly true.

True enough, anyway.

Glad looked between them again, then nodded, taking a shuddering breath.

“Soo… I had some free time these last few days, didn’t want to get in the way of the builders and all, so decided to take a walk. And I noticed, well…”

Donald waited, as patiently as he could, but he could feel his shoulders tightening.

“And there was this street that, no matter what, I couldn’t get to,” Gladstone finally said. “Walked down the sidewalk, and the light switched so I couldn’t cross. For like ten minutes. Circled the block, construction down the whole way. Tried an alleyway, giant dumpster. Utterly weird.

“And it just… well, it was unusual, and I thought you might want to know. Is all.”

Donald blinked, still trying to fully wake up. He couldn’t get to a certain street? Why would his luck block a street?

And what did that have to do with… Oh.

Oh!

“What street.” He demanded, too high strung to even pretend to be

casual about the question. Gladstone didn't seem to mind; he actually looked relieved at his response.

"17th St N. The block with that old movie theater, you know the one we all thought was haunted as kids?"

It had turned out to be a front for an early Evronian outpost, if Donald remembered correctly. Experimenting with inducing fear in passersby and draining the excess instead of turning them into Cool Flame zombies. But Gladstone's luck shouldn't keep him away from somewhere that had a *history* of being dangerous, right?

Donald nodded, making a mental note to check it out. At some point.

He could go after work…? No, it was family dinner night, he refused to miss that. And if it was the middle of the night, he probably wouldn't see anything useful from the outside. *And* he'd look suspicious, to boot.

Tomorrow? Wait, no, he was planning a visit to a nearby agency, they had a larger R & D department and he wanted to talk to them. Which meant an early flight out and an evening flight back if he didn't want anyone to notice his disappearance.

What about-

"I could swing by?" Panchito offered, and Donald's thoughts screeched to a halt as he looked over. Panchito's face was open, earnest.

"I don't-" Donald started, before he cut himself off. Panchito wouldn't want to hear him say no to help, especially if the reason was 'I don't

want you in danger.' He'd been clear about that yesterday. And it wouldn't be that bad, right, just walking down a street? Gladstone's luck could have been keeping him away from a mugging, or a twisted ankle on some uneven pavement, it didn't *have* to be serious.

But *Donald's* luck was horrendous, so it was probably a FOWL base or something.

He was going to work himself into a state if he kept thinking like that.

"Be safe," Donald finally said, Panchito still watching him. "I don't like you being in danger either."

Panchito's eyes were warm. Comforting. He nodded.

Gladstone coughed pointedly. Donald flailed, launching a piece of mango in the air.

"Glad that's settled," he grumbled, pouting. Donald patted his hand, only being slightly condescending.

"Thank you," he said, entirely serious, "for letting me know."

Gladstone huffed, but he relaxed, and breakfast continued. It was surprisingly comfortable, given the people involved.

"Pancho, how're you planning on getting home? Do you need a ride?" Donald asked abruptly, as he realized they hadn't determined that yet. Panchito blinked at him slowly, face blank.

Yeah, he had no plan for getting home.

"I can drive you," Gladstone offered before Panchito could speak. Now it was Donald's turn to stare.

It wasn't like Gladstone *never* offered to help with something. It was just that usually, he was getting something out of it. Or had been asked and was making a show of being generous. Or his luck led him to the situation and he figured that there was something good waiting down the line if he took the hint.

Even the pier and the morning coffee seemed to be planned to keep Gladstone in Donald's good books. He didn't *mind* feeling used, or bribed really, at least it was for safety from the Blot instead of some selfish scheme. But offering to play chauffeur didn't quite… fit?

Panchito was cheerfully accepting; Gladstone even offered to drive them *to the suspicious street first.* What was happening.

Gladstone glanced at him, and clearly caught the expression on his face.

"How *else* am I gonna get embarrassing college stories about you?" He teased.

Yeah, that made more sense; Donald rolled his eyes with a snort.

"I was cool in college," he retorted, which was barely true, but Panchito nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes, he was the cool one! Always on dangerous adventures, traveling around the world!” With him, Donald mentally added. Most of his college adventures had been Caballero ones.

“We never get to go sightseeing on adventures,” he pointed out. “It’s all caves and death traps. I’m not sure I’ve even seen the Eiffel Tower.”

That one was a blatant lie, he had seen it.

When it was being constructed during the World Fair in 1889. Raider had dragged him there in some hope of *leaving* him in the past while he stole the Royal jewels. Still, he’d gotten a bit of time to look around, that had been nice. He’d wanted to visit the Louvre before he had to leave/catch Raider to get himself a ride back to his timeline, but it hadn’t worked out.

He’d try to organize a family trip, but none of the kids were overly interested in art. Huey and Webby might find the historical aspects interesting, and Louie might enjoy the break no matter what the subject matter, but it wasn’t an ideal fit.

José would probably have a good time though, maybe he could plan some trip for the three of them instead?

Sure. Someday.

Donald left shortly after that, feeling mildly threatened at the two of them being alone to gossip about him, but he did need to get to work.

He did ask that Panchito keep him posted on his little adventure, before he forced himself out the door and to SHUSH.

330 passed him in the hallway, confirming he was still going back over the list of prison visitors, but hadn't had too much luck thus far; most of them had already been identified, there wasn't much left to work with. So another dead end. He was getting pretty sick of those. But with so many variables, they needed to knock some of them out just to see what was actually viable information.

Right now, Ghast and the buyers from the auction also seemed to be dead ends. Ghast had shut up like a clam and had refused any and all interrogations. He hadn't said a word at all, in fact, something that Donald was concerned about but had no capacity to deal with. The party host and his robin assistant were in the wind, supposedly on a low-tech retreat to 're-center themselves.'

The buyer herself was a ghost. Nobody had been able to identify her despite a concentrated effort. She hadn't been seen on the barge or at the airport with the power cells. It was possible she had vanished with the guards on the plane, but they had no way to know. No confirmed evidence of any people had been found, and Donald didn't expect them to find anything.

He sent an email to the code breaking team asking if they had finished identifying everyone from the list. He was more curious about who sold the cells at this point, since that was a confirmed Blot connection, and they were low on those. Despite how fast they'd moved in Spain, the raids that had produced the magical weapons hadn't produced much else. The agents they'd arrested were as silent as Ghast was, and nothing on site had thus far been connected to a larger organization.

Donald knew there had been dozens of people and plenty of trucks on the convoys that had left; it was *incredibly* frustrating that they had so

little information from that. Though, that had been right as they discovered the bugs all over all of their bases, so it did make sense.

Absently, he sent a report to Ravenson about the two trackers, conceding that he didn't know if it was related to his SHUSH work or not. She replied quickly, advising that she would have someone check their security cameras and see if he had been followed at any point. Which was all they could really do.

Until they found more information, the things could have come from so many sources. Hell, they could have been a *mistake,* maybe they had been meant for another vehicle entirely.

He considered, for a wild moment, that the trackers had been placed by someone getting rid of them on their *own* car, and snorted a wild laugh. Then he pulled up the chat option on his shield watch.

PK: have you heard anything from your friend?

Gizmoduck: no, not yet

Gizmoduck: which is pretty normal! Nothing concerning yet!

Gizmoduck: but can we meet to discuss the shield test? I have a new model to test

Gizmoduck: and we can talk about your friend? I might have some progress

PK: … bad week for that, i'm swamped

PK: tonight works if youre okay with it being late

He didn't get an answer immediately, so he switched to his email instead. One response from Dr. Perkins, saying he hadn't heard of anyone trying to poach their scientists, but the Duckburg base was 'woefully understaffed,' so he would likely have better luck asking elsewhere.

"Double Duck! Don't suppose you got in some kind of barfight last night?" A voice called in from his office doorway. Donald glanced up, dragged out of his thoughts, to see Agent RN grinning in the open space.

"Don't remember being in one; did I get a concussion?" He asked, as cheerfully as he could manage. RN snorted a laugh and took the comment as an invitation, plopping herself in 330's abandoned chair.

"Not a clue," she replied, sliding her phone over. "There was some livestream of the fight, I guess, but the screen was on the ground, so this is all anyone caught."

Donald resisted the urge to sigh, or tell her that handing over her personal cell phone was a *really bad idea* in their line of work, and instead peered at the screen. Gladstone had said there weren't any clear shots of him, had Glad missed something?

Oh. Huh.

There was nothing from the fight, but apparently there *was* video of

him hauling Drake and Kelli into the air, drink in one hand while everyone around them yelled and cheered. The video looked like it came from Kelli's account, and he wasn't tagged by name, so that might explain why Glad hadn't seen it.

The caption said: *this guy got stalked here by some weird tech bro, beat up the guys bodyguard after he attacked our bouncer, then did this nonsense. #onlyinduckburg #yeahthiswastechnicallystcanardwtfever*

"Not sure I could do that without straining something," Donald lied blandly, sliding the phone back. RN huffed a laugh.

"Crying shame. Think we can find him and get his workout routine?" She asked, shoving the phone away. Donald shook his head.

"Best of luck. Kinda got one of those faces," he joked, gesturing vaguely at his own face. RN looked him over blatantly.

"You really do share a resemblance," she observed. Donald forced as casual of a shrug as he could manage.

"You know, I had the class find doppelgangers for everyone a while back, as a facial recognition exercise. Apparently I closely resemble some guy that works at Marie Cluck too," he said cheerfully. "And another one with a funny voice. So that's three now just in Duckburg."

"Huh. Think you've got a secret twin?"

No, he was pretty aware of his twin's existence.

“Not sure how that would have been kept a secret, but who knows? Maybe they’re clones,” Donald quipped. Which was actually a terrifying thought, if he let himself think about it. FOWL had worked with clones before, it wasn’t that unbelievable.

“Ugh, thanks for that thought,” RN shuddered. “Oh, came to let you know, there’s a new class of trainees that the Director wants in your course soon. We’re waiting for them all to clear basic training, but I wanted to let you know.”

“Anything I should know about?”

“Nothing that stands out, but their personnel files are available if you want to review. One of them is from the area, but that’s all I can think of.”

RN wandered off after a few more minutes of chatter; she was the primary head of basic training, so they were loosely in the same department, and she had plenty of ‘department intel’ (gossip) to share about the other trainer agents.

Once she left, he took a few minutes to skim the trainee’s files. He didn’t know how he was going to add a new class to his schedule with the Blot and FOWL investigation, but that was a future problem.

The incoming class was much of the same as the previous; there were some recruited from the military, a few from law enforcement, one was listed as a vigilante hacker, that would be fun.

Nothing overly distinctive, but since they had to censor anything identifying, that was normal.

He flipped through the files for the Duckburg local, finding someone listed as an activist who had been found breaking into some huge corporation to steal and publish proof of their corrupt dealings. Lucky for the now-trainee, they'd been found by an agent looking for the same information, and had gotten a job offer instead of jail time.

Well, they'd be interesting to have in class. Between them and the hacker, he might have some luck with the early out-of-the-box thinking lessons.

Gizmoduck: sure, thats fine

Oh goody, another late night. Donald sent a prayer to the universe for some sleep.

Like that would ever happen. Why had he decided to come out of retirement again?

Sighting of Mme Rouge

330 popped back into the office, with no news. He'd been through all the visitors to the prison and had found nothing, so that seemed to be a confirmed dead end. The R&D department had nothing new about the guns, besides that they were all made to take magic, not shoot it.

So they had a confiscated armory and still no idea what it was meant for. Donald sent a message to Morgana to ask if she had heard anything else, but he wasn't holding out hope that she would respond. They hadn't spoken since their early meeting at the club.

He hoped she was safe, and just focused on making sure the magic community was protected. He didn't have any other way of finding her.

Despite his personal history, he wasn't really a member of the community himself. José was; his family had a history of being magic practitioners, but Donald was a special case. Completely unique, as far as he knew, actually, and it wasn't a pleasant position.

"So what are we going to look into next?" 330 asked. "Our investigation into the old FOWL bases was passed onto local agents, we can't find anything on the prison reports, and everything else is with the main task force."

Donald sighed.

"Nothing concrete, same as usual. I'm flying out to Colorado tomorrow to ask some of our scientists about any recruitment offers they've received, but it's a longshot," Donald replied. 330 let out a humorless laugh.

“That’s what you said about the old bases, and look where that got us,” he pointed out.

“I said that about the prison footage, too,” Donald retorted. 330 made a face.

“Alright, we’re batting 50/50 here. Why recruitment, though?”

“I noticed a while back that there are a lot of recent supervillains with a science twist. Dr. Ghast in particular, who previously didn’t seem to have any interest in world destruction, and then he shows up with Blot power cells.”

“Unstable cells,” 330 pointed out. “If he was working with the Blot, you’d think he would make them better.”

“True,” Donald agreed, “But his goal doesn’t exactly line up with the Blot either. In fact, nothing that we can tie to the Blot’s technology lines up with his previous motives, so we have to toss those motives out for now. Prison may have changed him.”

“But you don’t think so,” 330 observed, leaning forward. “Or you wouldn’t be pointing out that none of his conspirators seem to be in good shape after they work with him.”

Donald nodded.

“No, I don’t think people change that much. He wanted to destroy magic, because he wanted to live in a world without magic. Not

destroy the world in general. Summoning an archdemon doesn't really match that, and I don't really see him getting that suicidal in lockup."

"So, if he's not working with them directly?"

"I think he, or whoever freed him, is using his tech to take out the competition," Donald explained. "And that's why they're not attacking people yet. They don't want anyone to realize that they're intentionally selling sabotaged weapons."

330 considered him, head tilted.

"We only have two cases where the cells exploded," he said after a moment.

"We only have two cases so far," Donald replied. "And there could be more that we didn't hear about. Ghast is the only one that actually got to the point of using them; if we didn't know for a fact that the cells had been on the plane, we would have thought it was a normal explosion, wouldn't we?"

"We wouldn't even investigate it as hard," 330 said slowly, horror dawning, " *There wouldn't be any bodies.* "

Donald nodded grimly.

"We don't have the resources to look into every unexplained explosion that had no confirmed deaths," Donald replied in a low tone, "but yes, that's my thought."

330 took a breath. Then two.

“What does this have to do with scientists being recruited?” He asked, when he had recovered.

“Well, it’s not like they can list SHUSH as their employer,” Donald gestured vaguely with a hand as he spoke, needing to move or he would start pacing. “And based on what Gizmoduck told me, his friend was recruited because they wanted the freedom to do what they wanted, not work for a corporation making the next cellphone.”

“So they would look like the perfect candidates to give some funding and resources, then let loose to blow themselves up,” 330 concluded. He had crossed his arms, like he was holding himself together.

“We’re supposed to be looking for FOWL involvement,” Donald said. “And they’ve done plenty worse than that.”

330 offered to look into unexplained explosions anyway, which was a terribly depressing idea, so Donald sent him home to sleep instead. If that was sounding like a good use of his time, he needed rest.

Donald didn’t have the same options; he didn’t have any more mission related tasks, but he did have what felt like a mountain of paperwork to go through. It wasn’t terribly time sensitive, but it had been piling up, and he wanted one thing to be off his plate at least.

Panchito: donald! We have visited the strange street

Panchito: the theater seems to be the place gladstone could not visit, but i

could not find a reason why. It is empty, and all the doors are locked tight

Donald: maybe someone is using it as a hideout? They wouldnt want to leave anything laying around

Panchito: oh!

Panchito: perhaps

Panchito: there was one odd thing

Panchito: we saw a woman leaving, seemed in a big hurry

Panchito: and gladstone couldnt get anywhere near her!

Panchito: a flock of pigeons knocked him over whn he tried!

Donald: what did she look like

Panchito: i got a photo!

The photo took a while to load. Donald kept glancing at his phone as he finished signing reports, watching the spinning wheel while his fingers tapped against the desk.

“Double Duck? A word?” Ravenson called through his open office

door. Donald nodded, and she stepped inside, shutting the door. He was certainly popular today.

"Have you had a chance to look at the new trainee reports?" She asked, sitting down in the spare chair.

"Briefly; I think we have a good group incoming, but I didn't dig into anything that deeply," he said carefully, eyeing her. Was he meant to focus on that? Because right now he and 330 were assigned a mission, so unless that was changing before this class started, he assumed that he would need to balance both, and active criminals were the bigger priority, surely?

Come to think of it, what was 330 supposed to do when Donald was teaching? Was he taking over the mission solo? He'd said at the beginning that it would be a waste to move 330 straight to teaching without being a field agent.

"There's one for a recruit that comes from the Duckburg area. Given your recent fame, I wanted to confirm if you have a plan in place, should you be recognized," she explained, surprisingly hesitant. Donald got the distinct and uncomfortable feeling there was a lot more to it than that.

It wasn't the first time he'd thought she was holding back information, and while that was to be expected, the topics she was vague about seemed odd. Like this moment; Duckburg was a large city, and he'd managed his identity fine thus far. As far as she knew, he had successfully bluffed his own cousin on the fly.

"Why the specific concern here? Not that I don't appreciate the warning," he said cautiously, watching her closely. Ravenson's face went through a minute spasm, like she'd wanted to wince but hid it. An excellent poker face, but Donald could usually read between the

lines.

Not that he knew *why* he didn't have much trouble with her. They'd never worked together prior to him coming out of retirement, and never in the field.

He wondered what her previous codename had been. Ravenson wasn't an approved Agent code, and he doubted it was her personal nickname.

"I believe you're acquainted with this particular recruit, at least distantly. So there's a higher chance than usual of them knowing you. Beyond that, I'm not at liberty to discuss the recruits identity," she explained carefully. More than a casual acquaintance, then. That could be an issue.

The identity thing had been different with Agent 22, who was an established agent that had retired. Trainees didn't have the same clearance and shouldn't know anyone yet, in case they washed out or had to be blacklisted. But him being the only teacher of their new final course meant that the usual method of keeping them apart until they *did* have security clearance wasn't exactly an option.

Donald… should be more worried about this. He really, really should be worried that someone he knew, besides Bentina, was joining SHUSH, would be a student of his, and he needed to deal with the identity question before said student was sitting in his classroom being blindsided by the whole thing. Hell, *he* would be better off not knowing in advance who to expect.

Who did he know that might join up? Age wasn't a set parameter, but they were likely to be younger. Didn't exactly narrow things down much, especially if they didn't know each other well, or if they only knew each other through some mutual person…

He would have to check into the recruit, it would be faster than trying to remember every person he vaguely knew in their twenties. Assuming this person *was* in their twenties…

"I'll look into it. Thanks for the heads up," he finally replied, and she nodded decisively. Like it had been a debate.

Ravenson got up to leave. Donald glanced at his phone, where the photo had finally loaded.

Creamy white feathers. Plain clothing, just a dark jacket and a t-shirt. Nothing that stood out, no jewelry or details to her outfit. She wasn't wearing shoes, which wasn't terribly unusual, but it was one less thing to look at. Something about her was incredibly forgettable, the most average woman he'd seen today.

She didn't seem to know she'd been photographed, looking back towards the blurry building with one hand hovering by her ear, combing hair out of her eyes. Red hair, which was the only thing that was eye-catching.

Wait.

Wait.

"Director!"

Ravenson looked at the photo with the gravity of a life or death

decision, before sending it to their facial recognition team.

Which prompted several questions, like ‘where did you get this?’ and ‘the old *theater?!’* and ‘why is your partner at the old theater taking pictures of people?’ Donald had to explain that Panchito had gone because Gladstone got weird vibes from the place, and he happened to mention it at breakfast, which gained him an extremely dubious look that he ignored.

Gladstone hadn’t directly asked him if he was a *spy,* and until he did Donald wasn’t confirming it. For SHUSH or his cousin; the last thing he wanted to do was subject Gladstone to an unnecessary interrogation. Besides, it wasn’t too odd to conclude that he was working with Paperinik, or that Gladstone had mentioned this specific thing offhand during breakfast. Even if Gladstone’s luck sounded incredibly weird if you hadn’t seen it in action before.

So instead of worrying about how well his story held up under scrutiny, Donald focused on theorizing what was going on at the theater. He’d guessed earlier that it might be a hideout, not a hidden lab or base, and surely the Blot wouldn’t set-up shop so close? The woman had been tied to the power cell *buyers* , not the sellers, so she might not be directly related to anything with the Blot. But that left the question of what the cells had been purchased for in the first place; even if she wasn’t working with the Blot, or FOWL for that matter, she might have valuable intel.

She was the one that had known the cells were unstable, after all. And she’d clearly been smart enough to not be on the plane when they were being moved.

Ravenson had a few agents on standby to start looking into who might currently own the building, starting to gather any security or CCTV recordings from the area to try to find another angle on the woman, wanting all the information before they did anything.

Donald didn't like the idea of waiting. They'd been too slow to catch people enough times already.

And he would be out in Duckburg in the cape later anyway.

But first, he left Ravenson to finish coordinating her investigative team, and went home for dinner.

It was at the Manor, not the houseboat, but Donald circled home first to change into something more casual. Partially because his identity held up better the less people saw Donald Duck dressed as Double Duck, partially because it was spaghetti night, and he wasn't pressing his extremely limited luck with red sauce.

The houseboat was empty. This was normal, he lived alone. Even if he got visitors to the house or the beach more often than not. Somehow, it felt more empty than usual today.

Someone had tidied up after breakfast; he wasn't sure which of them. Neither guest seemed likely, unless Gladstone had tripped and launched the dishes away. Panchito would have done the dishes, but neither of them knew where things went.

Donald slowed, peering around with a frown. The whole kitchen was clean. It wasn't just the dishes. The counters were freshly scrubbed; he could smell his usual lemon cleaner. The floors had been swept, and mopped. The garbage was taken out.

He moved further into the boat, setting his bag down silently on the table. The living room was tidy, clearly vacuumed and dusted. A throw blanket that had been on the couch was gone, and he was

betting he could find it in the basket they belonged in.

From where he stood, a basket of folded laundry was visible, sitting on top of the dryer.

Donald felt distinctly bribed. He pulled out his phone, wondering if he'd missed a message, but there was nothing. Just Bentina confirming dinner time.

He went through the whole house again, looking for some hint, but besides a pleasantly tidy house, there was nothing he could find. Someone (and he was pretty sure he knew which someones) had come in, cleaned everything up, and left. And now he had dinner with the whole family.

Nothing to be done though; he changed shirts and started the walk to the Manor.

Gladstone's house was coming along great; the exterior seemed to be done already, and last he heard they were working on the plumbing. Soon he'd have a permanent neighbor.

Which would make him much more comfortable for Gladstone's sake, considering everything. Was the hotel he was in safe enough? Couldn't he stay at the Manor instead?

No. Gladstone couldn't stay there any more than Donald could. It wasn't like there weren't guest rooms open, Scrooge was unlikely to say no to a genuine need, but…

Well. Best not to dwell on it.

… degenerates!

No, he wasn't going to think about that either. Scrooge said, he *said,* that that wasn't what he meant. Donald was going to take him at his word, was going to let him try to prove it. That meant not actively carrying the grudge everywhere with him. If it came back up he could pick that anger back up with it.

The woods were quiet. Bentina had started getting wiring laid in for lights on the Manor half of the path, having overruled Scrooge on 'budget' with 'safety!', and Webby had already laid out a few runestones for protection and safe travels. They were also painted with pink glitter paint.

As he climbed up the last of the hill, he found Louie waiting for him, sprawled on a blanket with his phone in hand. He saw Donald and all but flailed to get to his feet, phone shoved away into his pockets as he scrambled up.

"Hey, Unca Donald! You're home early!" He announced, voice pitched *just* loud enough that Donald glanced around immediately for whichever sibling he was signaling. He didn't see anyone, but that hardly meant anything, given who his siblings were.

"This is about my regular time, but I did rush up the hill a bit," he said casually. "Noticed someone tidied up the boat; any ideas who?"

Donald wondered, sometimes, how Louie got away with his lies. Sure, someone new wouldn't know his tells, but family should notice how he always looked just up and to the left of their gaze, how his thumbs occasionally tapped his index fingers, how he clicked his tongue. Dewey and Huey noticed more often than not, but it seemed like

nobody else did.

Louie was tapping his thumbs as he answered.

“Huh, no idea. Didn’t one of your boyfriends stay the night? Maybe he wanted to help out.”

“Maybe,” Donald said instead of calling him out. No reason to say anything just yet, and Louie always seemed so pleased when he thought he’d successfully tricked Donald, he usually gave something away after.

“So, dinner? I think Mrs. B made French onion soup, sure smelled good earlier,” Louie said, folding up the blanket he’d been lying on as he talked. Another odd point, that he didn’t ask Donald to help him.

Donald helped anyway, it was easier with two people, but it was worth noting.

Plus, soup? He thought it was spaghetti night. What a strange coincidence, that they were having one of his favorites instead.

“Where are your siblings?” Donald asked, starting the walk back to the Manor. Louie tucked the blanket under his arm and grabbed Donald’s free hand, swinging them casually.

“Dunno, think Huey and Webby are working on some research project. Dewey’s probably chatting with Gosalyn, they’ve got some workout routine thing they’re putting together, Dewey *swears* he’s gonna be a hero someday and needs to have it handled-”

Louie continued to chatter about how focused Dewey was on his new goal of being a superhero, while Donald shook his head with amusement. He would have to check with Drake and see if Dewey had spoken to him; it was clear in hindsight that Dewey probably knew his identity.

Especially if he was chatting with Gosalyn about hero training.

“Did you really mean he could be a hero when we’re older?” Louie asked as they reached the Manor. Donald hesitated, then made an iffy hand movement with one hand.

“If he still wants to, yes. If only to stop him sneaking out behind my back,” he answered. “If he’s going to do it either way, at least this way he has someone to go to for help.”

“Like Paperinik?” Louie asked. Donald glanced at him sideways, eyes narrowed, but Louie was still looking forward.

“Maybe. Or Darkwing. Possibly Gizmoduck, but I don’t think Dewey’s interested in armor.” And Darkwing understood having *backup;* Gizmo had Gyro, sure, but until Gyro was willing to jump into a mech suit himself he wasn’t as helpful as having Launchpad had to be.

He hadn’t asked, it hadn’t come up really, but if Launchpad somehow *didn’t know* he was dating Darkwing Duck, Donald was going to tell him himself.

When things were calmer.

The house smelled heavenly, just like Louie had said, and everyone was already in the dining room when they entered, Louie tossing the blanket into a corner with a flair before taking a seat.

Donald's preferred seat between Dewey and Webby was open. The seat that had, up till recently, been taken by Della at family meals. She was instead sitting between Huey and Scrooge, gesturing wildly as she explained some old griffin legend she'd come across.

He slid into his seat slowly, absently listening to Della's story, chewing things over. The whole family seemed to be in on this plan, whatever this plan was. All he could tell right now was that everyone seemed to want him in a good mood.

Well, at least the kids and Della, he considered as he looked around the table. Bentina was still in the kitchen (he was long banned from offering help if she was cooking, grumbling about too many cooks), humming under her breath, and Scrooge didn't seem to have noticed he and Louie had arrived.

Della caught his eye and gave him a vague wave and smile. They hadn't really spoken since their argument over the phone; he had expected her to confront him about that call when he got back, but instead she seemed to be giving him space? He couldn't figure it out.

Dinner went smoothly. Bentina sat with them and chatted about the recipe she used. The boys were behaved, not throwing anything or yelling. No talk of adventures. Huey even asked how work was going; Donald scrambled to explain that the embezzlement issue was still ongoing, but that he would likely be going back to teaching soon, while Bentina chuckled silently into her cup when no eyes were on her.

Donald could feel the tension in his back growing by the minute,

waiting for the shoe to drop. They were clearly going to drop *something* on him, but somehow he couldn't make himself break the tension and just ask.

So when the boys turned to look at him as soon as his bowl was empty, he sighed in relief, slumping a bit in his seat. Finally.

"Soo… you know how you haven't been on an adventure in a while?" Dewey started, leaning close with a faux casual look.

Well, that wasn't exactly what he had been expecting, but that wasn't so bad.

"And you've been saying that you can go if we give you warning?"

He nodded, hesitantly. He had said that, yes. But he was so *busy,* with the Blot, and Darkwing might need backup, and he had to plan Gandra Dee's extraction, and Uno…

"So this is that warning! Can you get a few days off soon? There's no rush! We can wait until you can!" Huey jumped in, hands planted on the table in front of him. Dewey was nodding enthusiastically.

"We're going to get an enchanted ruby! It holds fire powers!" Webby jumped in, grinning widely. "There used to be a religious sect that worshipped it as a relic!"

"The ruby supposedly holds the power of a volcanic eruption that a powerful mage prevented from destroying the nearby town," Scrooge added. He wasn't looking at Donald, more at the kids. For once, though, they barely glanced at him; their eyes were glued to Donald's

face.

Donald was swamped. He was *so* swamped lately, and it wasn't like this was a normal job; lives were potentially on the line.

On the other hand, these were his kids. And they wanted *him* to be there. And he had promised he would.

Okay. Meeting with Gizmoduck tonight, Colorado base visit tomorrow. Then it would be the weekend…

"How long do you expect us to be gone?" Donald asked, and the kids' eyes lit up when he did. Scrooge looked back at him. His face was almost eager, a wrinkled match to the four smaller ones around him.

"Oh, no more than a day or two. Maybe explore the area around the temple, if it doesn't collapse on us. We can leave Friday evening, weather permitting, and be back by Monday afternoon, Tuesday morning at the latest, I think. Della?"

Della jumped, like she was surprised to be asked.

"Uh, yeah, forecast is supposed to be clear. I don't have anything going on Friday, so we're good to go!" She recovered magnificently, ending her statement with a thumbs up.

Okay. Okay. He could do this. This was his family, and it was only a few days. There was no reason to think the Blot would attack in the next few days, and he could talk to Gizmo tonight about both Uno and Gandra.

Besides that, he realized with a mild shudder, this was a magical artifact. The Blot was equally likely to go after it instead of acting in Duckburg. This way, Donald would be there.

“I can do that,” Donald promised, ignoring the feeling of dread settling around him like a shroud, as all four kids cheered at the ‘whole family adventure!’ It was just his normal anxiety acting up, no reason to buy into it.

Everything was going to be *fine*.

Old Friends

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The kids were too wired to sleep for a long while, planning out their trip to this temple in the Ural Mountains. Donald had never heard of a volcano being out there, and made the mistake of saying so, and was treated to a two way lecture between Webby and Huey explaining that there had been this *one,* and the warlock that had stopped the eruption had cooled it down to the point it was no longer active, trapping the power in a faceted ruby.

Donald conceded that was possible, with a large enough ruby, but wondered at it. Warlocks, and indeed most magic users, would have a lot of trouble corralling an element that strong. Elemental magic required a certain amount of collaboration between the user and the element, and a fire would want to *spread,* not be collected. Even a volcano elemental would have struggled to make the magic do what they were asking of it. And elementals were rare beyond belief; true elemental magic was considered a taboo by most magic practices.

If that was indeed the full story, though, it meant that the gem would be very dangerous; the fire within it would *still* want to do what fire does.

He finally slipped away, citing getting to work early as an excuse, leaving the boys and Webby still bouncing around their room. Funny, they hadn't been *this* excited in a while. Was it really because he was coming this time?

Maybe they missed seeing him as much as he had. Or maybe *this* was the adventure that Scrooge had promised them as a bribe.

Ducklair Tower was mostly dark when he arrived, and the garage was nearly empty. The Tower hosted a number of businesses, held some storage on lower levels, even had dining on a few floors, but the one thing it did not have was housing. Coming late at night was always a bit eerie as a result; lights only coming on as he walked into a hallway, footsteps echoing on linoleum floors.

The 151st floor was just as empty, but it hit differently. As it always did, lately; the thing about being active as Paperinik again was that he was *here* so much more.

He'd tried to visit more, back when- when Uno had first been deactivated. Talked to the cameras about what was happening in his life, played recordings of Uno's soap operas. Hoping some magic solution to waking him would appear. Then he'd joined the Navy, and the visits had stopped while he was deployed. Then college, and the Three Caballeros, and SHUSH…

He still tried, but he would freely admit that it hadn't been doing him any favors, he had so little free time as it was and he was so *tired.* So he'd let the visits dwindle. Until he needed to come back out as PK.

He hoped Uno wouldn't hate him for it.

Gizmoduck was already on the roof; the security system ringing an alarm as he slipped inside the main room; he had to rush through yanking his uniform on to let him in.

"PK, hi! So sorry about how late it is, sounds like you've got a lot going on? But I'm hoping to start getting set up to, er, wake your friend up. If that's alright?"

Donald blinked, taking a minute to process, while Fenton shed the

armor with a gesture and revealed a box he'd had under one arm. He looked manic, dark bags under his eyes and enthusiastic grin in place.

"Yeah," he finally replied, "you can start. Just, please be careful?"

It was stupid to ask; Fenton wouldn't break something on purpose. But Fenton nodded seriously, and Donald relaxed, just a bit.

"The main concern I have is making sure I can actually port into the system; it's basically his brain, so we need to be as careful as possible. Plus, his system is a bit older, so I had some trouble finding the right parts. A few are still on their way, but I figured I could get started!" Fenton explained, setting down the box of parts and rummaging through it.

What he had appeared to be a helmet, similar to his visor, with a number of cables attached. Donald couldn't make much sense of it, but he didn't really need to.

"I think, when we're ready to go in, you go in. I can monitor the system and make sure that everything is running smoothly from here, but he won't know me; he's more likely to respond to you, and you're less likely to get caught in the firewall," Fenton continued.

"If we do this, is 'firewall' going to be literal?" Donald asked, finally slumping into a chair. Fenton chuckled awkwardly.

"Er, well…"

Of course. Maybe Donald could get Tron to visit and help out, this seemed right up his alley.

Apparently Gandra was still out of contact, per Gizmo. He insisted it wasn't a concern yet, she'd *said* it would be a bit before she could safely reach out, and they needed to be careful now that she had agreed to leave… It was clear he was worried about it, so Donald didn't press.

"So, if you can just, er, cast a spell at the shield again? So we can see if it works?" Fenton asked, holding it in front of him. He'd shed the suit, leaving it to the side so it could take readings. Donald nodded, and when he got a thumbs up, launched a healing spell.

He… really didn't have much in his arsenal that wasn't dangerous, besides that.

The spell slowed when it hit the shield, but managed to get through, surrounding Fenton's head with flickering green light for a moment. He shuddered.

"That felt… different than before," he said. Donald blinked at him, nonplussed.

"Different how?"

"Oh, nothing bad! Well, er, actually, not that great. Like a shot of adrenaline? I feel like someone just jumped out and said boo!" Fenton explained, rubbing his chest absently. "So… that calibration isn't working, is it? Let's try one more, and…"

He fiddled with the thing on his arm for a moment, then nodded at Donald again, raising it. The next spell also went through, and Fenton

yawned, rubbing his eyes.

“Somehow, that seems… to do the opposite? Does that make sense?”

Out of curiosity, Donald tossed out a light spell, and watched a dark shadow dance across the floor as it hit the shield.

“That could actually be a useful setting,” he pointed out, “assuming you could switch on the fly. And knew what they were trying to cast at you.”

Fenton chuckled, but even after Donald gave him a non-shielded heal he still looked exhausted. Donald told him to call it quits; they could pick this up later, but right now he was bound to make mistakes.

The fact that Fenton didn’t argue, just nodded and started throwing the armor back on, told Donald the poor guy needed the sleep badly; daytime hero and all, it was late for him. Donald watched him fly out the upper skylight with a concerned frown.

He should have asked him to text when he got home safe.

It was much later than Donald had expected, actually, and he didn’t feel like making the effort to go home. There was a bed here, it was fine.

It was quiet, at least. Just the occasional sound of whining electronics.

Dark. No flickers of stars or distant lights.

The bed was so, so still.

And Uno wasn't here.

Yeah, he hated this. Somehow he could tell, just lying here in the dark, that Uno wasn't here. That he was here, on the 151st floor, alone.

Fenton's idea didn't feel real. Wasn't it too easy? Just plug into the system and, what, press a button. Set off an alarm?

Wake up, Uno! It's been over fifteen years, I think you've got enough beauty sleep!

Or would he be Odin, now? Donald didn't know any of the story behind the name change, how he acquired a body, what happened between now and the far future. Odin hadn't told him, (though he hadn't been very subtle!), Donald had been left to piece things together when he got home and had a few minutes to really think about why Odin had felt so *familiar*.

He hadn't known, at that point, why Odin hadn't said something. Uno was an AI. It was perfectly reasonable that he would survive for hundreds of years. And picking a new name made plenty of sense, even not telling Lyla since she had to go between the timelines. But what could Donald do to mess things up? He could keep a secret! Why not actually say something, so they could enjoy their team-up with full knowledge, instead of secrecy?

Then Uno had been deactivated, and Donald had been *furious*. Furious at Everett, at Lyla for not warning him, at Odin for *lying-*

It had taken time, so much time, for him to fully realize that Odin hadn't told him anything so he wouldn't stop it from happening.

Even knowing about the timeline, and potentially destroying the future? Donald couldn't swear that he wouldn't have done exactly that. Done anything and everything to keep Uno from being deactivated, no matter the harm to the future, he would have done what he could to save the present. Which meant that Uno, Odin, knew Donald well enough to realize that he needed to lie.

Which made his comments about one last adventure all the more distressing. How hard had it been not to speak? Knowing that it was the last time he would ever see Donald? After waiting hundreds of years, just to not be able to say a word…

Sleep found him eventually, as soon as he stopped looking and just laid still to wait, thinking of nothing.

His dreams were thin and pale, a damp fog that felt insubstantial and yet somehow cloying. He woke to the glare of sightless gray eyes peering out of the fog at him, and stared at the ceiling for a long time before he remembered where he was.

The airport was quiet. It wasn't a SHUSH flight, so Donald was hopping on a flight out of Duckburg Airport with everyone else that needed to get to Colorado in a hurry this morning. He'd hoped that he might run into José, but it was a fleeting hope; he didn't work *at* the airport after all, he worked for an airline, and not the one Donald was taking. A pity, but that was life.

He felt his hackles rise the longer he was there, though. He felt watched, but no matter where he looked, he couldn't see anyone

paying him any mind, too focused on their luggage or getting coffee.

It was probably because the last time he'd been here, someone had been recording him. Or the trouble with Beaks afterwards.

Or the trackers on his car, which he had no idea what to do about. He was still certain one was from Mark Beaks, and was waiting for something to come of that. Should he expect the billionaire to show up at his house? Follow him to that coffee shop again? There was no way he'd been detained once the cop realized who he was; even Donald would have heard if Beaks had been properly arrested.

… he did double check the news to be certain that an arrest *hadn't* happened, while waiting for an overpriced coffee in a long line of tired travelers. Nothing of interest, though Beaks' Tweeter account wasn't showing anything from the bar prior to the fight, which was interesting. Had he not posted anything afterwards? Had he just removed everything after? He'd been streaming the whole thing, after all, but Donald couldn't find any record of it. Not even a comment mentioning it being removed, even though Gladstone had said he'd seen the actual recording yesterday.

One of the flight attendants squinted at him a bit as he handed over his passport for boarding. He hoped it was because she recognized him, which was a new wish for him, not because there was something wrong. His abysmal luck could spell any number of complications, and the last thing he wanted to deal with was any delays right now.

Though it *would* be a bit funny to get detained as Double Duck. Not funny enough to want it to *happen,* but it would be his luck, wouldn't it.

Whatever her issue, the attendant didn't say anything, so he was able to get to his seat in peace. The plane was quiet; it wasn't even full.

Since it was a short flight, he couldn't do much. Check his email, review case notes, stare out the window and wonder if he could have flown himself there faster than the plane. Or just asked Launchpad, but *that* would have called way too much attention to his travels.

He hadn't told his family about this jaunt. The plan was to be home tonight, after all, just very late. If anyone asked about the timing, he would say he was trying to get all of his work done before a multi-day adventure.

Donald… didn't like that he was having to fudge the truth more often lately. He hated to lie, but his usual methods necessitated him being vague about details. It worked best if nobody asked him too many questions. It had served him well, but the kids seemed determined to ask detailed questions about *everything* he was doing. It was odd, to say the least, and inconvenient.

He hoped it was also temporary, or he was going to have to make up more elaborate stories to give them the details they wanted, and he didn't want to do that. He didn't know if he ever intended to tell them the full truth (no, but maybe yes?), but he *did* know he didn't want to ever make them doubt his word.

Since he didn't have any luggage, Donald was able to slip off the plane as soon as the doors opened, hardly daring to breathe lest his good luck get him stopped by security or something. He didn't actually relax until he got outside to meet his local contact.

He'd been a bit surprised that he was getting an agent guide, but the email had been clear it wasn't negotiable. There wasn't a current emergency that he was aware of, so Donald was left assuming that they took their lab security seriously.

Very seriously.

Technically, this location wasn't a SHUSH lab. It was a sister location, with a stronger science focus and with a different acronym that Donald struggled to remember. Started with an O, he was pretty sure. He'd worked with a few of their agents before, but nothing long term. Double Duck was more of an international crisis agent, and this branch (OWSA? No, that wasn't right…) tended to have dedicated nemesis.

Donald had never had one, personally; the closest thing he'd had was probably Raider, and that was more of an antagonistic friendship than anything else. Nemesis required so much personal attention to maintain, it wasn't something he *could* do, even if someone expressed interest.

"Sir!" Someone called out. Donald paused, uncertain if the shout was meant for him, and saw a sheep with curly red hair and glasses trotting towards him through the crowd.

"Er, Mr. DD?" The sheep asked when he got closer, and looked instantly relieved when Donald nodded. "My name is Carl, I'm the intern for OWCA. And your ride. Uh, do you have anything with you?"

Donald shook his head.

"I wasn't planning on staying long," he explained with a shrug. Internally he was trying to figure out why Carl, apparently, was willing to give him his *actual* name, intern or not. Unless it was a fake name? And he just didn't get a normal code until he was no longer just an intern?

“Oh! Well, then, let’s go!” Carl said enthusiastically, leading the way to a small town car. It was the non-descript style that it seemed only spies used. Or corrupt businessmen. Donald slid into the passenger seat; he wasn’t going to ride around like he was being chauffeured, no matter Carl’s surprised expression.

“So, we didn’t get much of an itinerary…? Director Ravenson only said you wanted to speak to our technicians. Is there a problem?” Carl asked, voice a bit high-pitched and fast. Donald glanced over as casually as he could manage, curious. Was he just nervous, or was there something else?

“With the recent security breach, I’m a bit wary of sending details anywhere. Just paranoia on my part, I hope. We’re not worried about anything specific here, if that’s your question,” Donald replied. Carl didn’t relax in any noticeable manner, but his voice was calmer when he spoke.

“Oh! Yes, that does make sense. But, uh, what are you looking for, that wasn’t available at your base?”

“More people. OWCA is more science focused, and you were the closest location,” Donald answered, glancing out the window. Was that a roller coaster being built in the distance? He would have thought city code wouldn’t allow that.

Carl looked at him from the corner of his eye. Donald continued not meeting his gaze. If Carl was going to be part of a spy network, he needed to improve his interrogation techniques if he wanted to get any more information.

“Does this have something to do with the Phantom Blot?”

Okay, nevermind to that, Donald thought with a surprised huff of laughter.

"It might. I've found some odd coincidences between the Blot's power cell designs and who has actually been using them. I want to know if anyone more integrated with the scientific community might know something."

Plus, with the noticeable increase in science-based villains in Duckburg the last several months, he did wonder if there were some shared circumstances. Might as well kill two birds with one stone, he figured, even as he winced at the idiom.

"Well, our technicians aren't as directly involved with any villainous activity, so I'm not sure how much anyone will know, but I'm sure they'll be happy to help!"

After passing through security (not as rigorous as SHUSH main bases were, interestingly), Donald was allowed into the labs. They were about what one would expect from a spy agency; several large open areas with strange machinery, people in lab coats running around testing and making notes. Few people paid any attention as they entered.

A tall eagle met them at the main door, full uniform pressed flat. He gave an imperious nod to Carl, who slid backwards and to the left of him while Donald stopped.

"Agent Double Duck, my name is Major Monogram. I understand you wish to speak to our staff?"

“Yes, sir. We’ve noticed a number of unaffiliated scientists, of the mad variety, using technology that comes from the Phantom Blot’s work. We’re trying to chase down how they’re being contacted. Since OWCA is more science based, I’m here to see if any of your staff might have been approached,” Donald explained, glancing around. Nobody was close enough to hear them, but he got a few interested glances regardless.

Maybe he should have worn a fedora. All agents here wore a fedora.

“Why would any of our scientists have been approached?” Monogram asked, mustache bristling.

“Well, their affiliation with OWCA wouldn’t be public record,” Donald said carefully, “but the fact that they’re engineers or scientists with a specialty in, say, experimental machinery would be something that the Blot, or FOWL, or whoever it is, could find out.”

Monogram continued to frown, but Carl’s eyes lit up.

“So someone trying to find desperate people that might be on their way to supervillainy would be looking for something just like that! Since from the outside they’re working at our cover company, which isn’t exactly cutting edge.”

Their cover, if Donald recalled, was filtration systems.

“Ah,” Monogram said, nodding seriously. Donald doubted he understood. “Yes, I see. Well, we’ve warned our staff that someone would be around, so they’re not working on anything that cannot be interrupted. Carl, please accompany Agent Double Duck. Excuse me.”

Finishing his statement, he left with a brisk nod and stride. Carl grinned nervously at Donald.

"Do you really think someone is trying to recruit from our team?" He asked, while Donald glanced around and started walking in a random direction.

"I think they're finding people somehow," Donald said, "but recruitment might not be the goal. We don't know how Dr. Ghast received his power cells, he's refused to speak to anyone, and the others were purchased at an auction. However, the buyer appeared to know in advance exactly what to expect, so clearly she had some information prior."

"So, partnership? Or a quid pro quo?"

"Possibly," Donald agreed, nearing the first lab area, with a dozen people reviewing a stack of reports. They looked bored, which meant they hopefully wouldn't mind the interruption. "But in both cases the cells exploded. The Blot's original ones weren't nearly as volatile."

Carl frowned, trying to parse that. Donald let him think and walked up.

"Good morning," he said politely, but they were already looking at him before he spoke. "I was hoping to ask you a few questions."

What followed were several wasted hours, effectively. None of the OWCA technicians had had a single recruitment offer, or anyone approaching them at all. They offered to ask their fellow scientists at varying conventions or events, but that would take time. Time that Donald was concerned they may not *have*.

Was he completely on the wrong track here? Since they hadn't been able to find a connection between Ghast and the red haired woman from the auction, Donald had guessed that the Blot himself was the connection, and that he was picking people directly. But he wasn't finding evidence of that here.

Maybe he was focused on other avenues, and Donald had made a mistake in just who was being approached? Ghast hadn't had a listed place of employment, and they had no idea about the auction buyer's group (though Donald was tentatively hopeful about Panchito's sighting); maybe they needed someone more desperate?

Or he was grasping at straws to be right.

One nice thing about an upcoming adventure, he thought to himself as he went through his notes; he would have fresh eyes when he got back to this.

"Agent DD? I had a thought," Carl offered, drawing Donald's attention.

"You're thinking that the Phantom Blot, or whoever he's working with, is finding people to give or sell these power cells to, people that aren't directly tied to him. Them," he started, and Donald nodded.

"Well, do you have a theory about why? It didn't sound like he used to work with people, so it's not a return to his older methods.."

"I think he's either testing something new and doesn't want to be caught in the crossfire," Donald said, "or he's taking out some kind of competition, maybe for whoever broke him out of prison. Could be

both.”

Carl nodded, fast. He didn’t look surprised.

“Right, right. I found some information on Dr. Ghast, he used to be one of our targets in Europe. Agent R was assigned… anyway, confirmed villain who was having a dry spell. And your auction was illegal, so obviously nobody there was a law-abiding citizen,” he explained quickly. Donald caught on.

“You think he would only approach criminals,” he replied, and Carl nodded faster, “so anyone *here* wouldn’t be a choice, since they’re employed legally.”

“Exactly! So maybe what we need to do is talk to a *villain!* ”

Which- yeah, he had no idea who to approach about that. He didn’t get the kind of villains that were approachable.

Thankfully, he was in a good place to deal with that.

“Do you have a suggestion?”

“Well,” Carl said casually, “Agent P is with Dr. Doofenshmirtz right now, I bet we could call him to chat.”

God this place was weird.

Wait, Agent P? Perry was stationed *here?*

Chapter End Notes

Shoutout to the one commentor that caught me mentioning Perry in chapter one ;D

Interlude: Peerrry~ Perry the Plaaatypuuus~

Chapter Notes

> Bonus chapter! This is just a shortie, so I won't make everyone wait a week for it ;)

“Ah, Perry the Platypus! How nice of you to join me!” Heinz Doofenshmirtz paused, peering at the shattered window. “You can just use the door, you know. All of this broken glass is dangerous! Neither of us wear shoes!”

“Which, you know, it is funny that so many species don’t wear shoes, but we still make them?” He continued thoughtfully, while Perry struggled against the ropes. He wasn’t seriously trying to get loose, but he had to make a show of it, or Heinz would stop talking.

Heinz continued on, wondering why shoes had been invented when so few species needed them. Was it some fashion choice? Heinz wasn’t much for fashion, of course, because his family had forced him to wear dresses or horribly clashing hand-me-downs through his traumatic childhood, and it had made him terribly uninterested in fashionable anything afterwards. One more thing his family had ruined for him, even if Heinz insisted that he didn’t care.

Perry had to remind himself that he was an agent, and a well known one at that. He could not go out to get revenge for Heinz’s horrific childhood. It could ruin his family’s lives.

That didn’t make the thought any less tempting.

“So, that is why I have built this! The-” Heinz started, whipping the tarp off of something, but he was interrupted by a loud beeping. He paused, arms still upraised, and squinted at Perry.

“Perry the Platypus. I believe that is your phone ringing,” he grumbled. Perry shifted an arm to reach a pocket and confirmed yes, his phone was going off. He got it out, chittering into the receiver.

“Well, that is just *rude.* Not turning your phone off for our battle today, that is very inconsiderate!” Heinz complained, gesturing around him vaguely.

“Agent P, can you pass the phone to Dr. Doofenshmirtz? We need to ask him something,” Carl was saying into the receiver.

Who were we?

Perry growled a response, holding the phone out.

“What? It’s for me?” Heinz asked, taking the phone. Perry continued to squirm out of his ropes, since he was distracted.

“Hello, Dr. Doofenshmirtz of Doofenshmirtz Evil Incorporated here. Who is this?”

“Oh, nice to meet you. What can I help you with?”

“Hmm, can’t say that I’ve ever met him. I heard about some of his exploits from Duckburg though, not somebody I would ever want to work with! That isn’t the kind of work we do here at Doofenshmirtz Evil Inc.”

“Oh, yes, I did have someone approach me about testing some new power cells they were building. Said they were a new kind of green energy that oil companies didn’t want anyone to know about. But they couldn’t explain what the energy was, so I had to turn them down. We generate our power here through wind and solar, and I’m not going to have our name besmirched by not being able to verify sources!”

“Yes, I believe I do, hold on.”

Heinz wandered off into the lab, rummaging through a pile of notes and paperwork on his desk. Perry wished he could hear what was happening on the other side; Carl hadn’t said a word about who this was. Or what the call was about.

Heinz, reading glasses perched on his long nose, was reading off a notepad, an address, name and phone number.

“It was a few months ago, so this may no longer be accurate- yes, that’s right. No, I don’t remember a redhead…”

“FOWL? Well, I can’t say I’ve ever considered them. No, nobody has ever approached me- I always assumed it’s because I’m legally an ocelot. FOWL only seems to hire birds. Very close minded of them! Not that I’m interested in that kind of team up, I prefer my independence! But it would be nice to be *asked,* you know?”

“Well, you see, after my family sent me away from home on a boat to America…”

Seriously, who was on the other line?!

“Yes, yes, I can pass that through Perry the Platypus. Why are you so concerned about some other villain with fake green energy? Shouldn’t you be worried about, I don’t know, assassination plots?”

Assassinations?!

“What?” Heinz stopped moving entirely, back snapping completely straight. Perry forgot, often, how tall the mad scientist was when he wasn’t hunched over.

“Those power cells they tried to sell me were made from *living people?!”*

Perry froze. He’d been listening, obviously, but now he was putting the pieces together and he didn’t like the final product.

This must be the SHUSH agent that was visiting the base today; he’d heard about it from Carl. Someone working the Blot case. The magic power cells and the terrible, long, list of victims from the first wave. The attack on Duckburg, the explosion in Spain. The recovered armory from old FOWL bases. It was a nasty case, the kind that made you shudder to even think about, knowing people were out there that would commit those kinds of crimes. OWCA wasn’t part of that investigation, at least not that Perry had heard, but he was primarily assigned to Heinz and his daily acts of evil.

If by evil, you meant ranging from ‘fairly inconvenient’ to ‘actually this is a good thing, let it happen.’ Like when he’d been so sick of having to deal with public restrooms and their general mess that he’d sent out robot hamsters to secretly build self-cleaning public ones all over Danville, slipping the funding into some bill that the Mayor had signed without even reading.

Heinz had never said why hamsters, of all things; not the anthropomorphic kind either, the small pet variety. He'd only said it should be 'obvious, Perry the Platypus, why hamsters made the ideal workforce!'

"If I *see* that no-good, deceitful, lying, awful- well, no, they communicated via email. But if I *hear* from them again-! Well, see them might be more accurate. I'll be getting an email after all, and I would be reading that with my eyes… Unless I use a screen-reader, then I would be hearing them."

"Oh, yes, I can give him the phone back. Perry the Platypus, Carl wants to talk to you again!"

Perry, finally freed of the ropes, took the phone back. Heinz plopped at his desk and started typing something furiously, hunched over the keyboard and growling under his breath.

"Agent P, Dr. Doofenshmirtz agreed to let us know if he received any further communications from FOWL or the person attempting to sell him tainted power cells," Carl explained. Perry chittered.

"Yes, we're assuming the seller was working with the Blot. Agent Double Duck is investigating."

Double Duck? Wait, Donald was working on this? Hadn't he retired?

He hadn't seen Donald in years; their last mission had been over a decade ago. They'd been assigned the same under cover infiltration of a weapons dealer. Perry was trying to tackle the weapons, Donald pursuing the leader.

It had turned into a weeks-long mission trying to keep their cover intact while reporting intel to their organizations. Donald had told him his real name after the first week, saying he didn't really care about his identity, he was more worried about his voice changer breaking down after so long in the field.

Perry did remember the duck constantly checking his phone, sending occasional messages that, from what he overheard, amounted to 'I'm fine, don't worry.' He hadn't asked who they were for, but he had wondered how someone with people at home could take this kind of job.

Then Linda had gotten pregnant, and he was named godfather of then baby Candace (and god, she had been so tiny), and he'd understood more. And less. He couldn't imagine being gone so long, when the kids would miss him. But he understood the determination to make their world safer, no matter the cost to himself.

None of this explained why Donald was here specifically, though. He'd retired years ago; Perry had heard he was raising triplets.

"I have to get going back to Duckburg, but I'll email you later," Donald's voice came over the line. Well, the voice changer one. Perry personally preferred his normal voice, but he understood covering up a distinctive trait for missions.

Perry chattered a confirmation, and ended the call, tucking his phone away. He'd like to get away fast enough to see his friend, but it sounded like that wasn't in the cards today.

"Well, that was an unusual interruption. Do you usually get agents from other agencies interrupting your day?" Heinz complained, getting up from his desk. Perry shook his head.

“Good, because that wasn’t at all disruptive. And by not disruptive, I mean completely disruptive! Now, where was I?”

His gaze settled on the still uncovered and unnamed Inator.

“Right! Behold my-”

At which point Perry tackled him.

Interlude: Scrooge (Too Slow)

Scrooge stepped up to Donald shortly after the Cloud Slayer took off, but lacking anything to say, he moved on as if he hadn't ever stopped, walking instead to check on the kids. They were settling in to sleep; with the long flight ahead of them, Huey had planned a schedule to try and defeat jet lag.

Donald looked about ready to join them; there were bags under his eyes, and his feathers were in need of a trim. He'd looked tired and stressed for weeks now. Scrooge *wanted* to blame him moving further away, or his new romantic entanglements, but he knew better. He was sharper than the sharpies, after all!

So he had to admit that Donald had clearly been stressed out since the Phantom Blot had escaped prison. He didn't know how involved Donald was, when he'd learned of the escape, if he was helping with the search or just sitting by the wayside, but he was clearly in the know and worried. More than worried, he was *scared.*

He'd seen his nephew in moments of terror, quick flashes on adventures usually, but this long, festering situation was something else. Something Scrooge *hadn't* seen on him before. AN all encompassing, endless worry that he had no idea how to counter. Donald could get over his fears on an adventure easily enough, it usually just took an immediate threat for him to flip to confident and capable. But this wasn't a threat he could fight. And it wasn't a threat Scrooge knew how to counter. Paperinik was the one that had managed it the last time, hero work wasn't in Scrooge's own repertoire, so it left him at odds trying to determine how, or even if, he could assist.

He hadn't been much help the last time the Blot was loose, either.

Scrooge had to wonder if Donald was only joining them today because he was worried about them being targeted. Magic item and all that, it was the exact kind of thing the Blot would have targeted. It had certainly occurred to Scrooge. But the kids wanted to go on this one, had wanted *Donald* to go, and in the end he figured they could handle anything. They were the McDucks! And as Donald liked to say, these ducks don't back down!

Besides, the Phantom Blot targeted magic users and magical items. Worst-case scenario, he could let the man have the stone and be done with it.

Since the kids were sleeping, and Della and Launchpad focused on a piloting schedule, Scrooge considered their goal.

The gemstone was supposedly the full power of a volcano, trapped by a powerful mage that died shortly afterwards from the strain. The gem was placed in a temple and fiercely protected, in the fear that any damage to it would release the volcano again. That had been in the past, though; the temple was long abandoned, the people moved on or dead, and only the barest of rumors that this place ever existed.

But Scrooge had a good sense for these kinds of things, and he was confident that the temple still existed. There were enough stories of other parties venturing inside to seek the gemstone that it seemed a guarantee that there was a treasure inside.

The stories also detailed that anyone that got near it were incinerated by either the stone's power or some defense in the temple, but they'd faced worse odds.

Scrooge glanced around again, checking in. Della and LP still in the cockpit, Dewey, Huey and Webby sleepily giggling to themselves in their seats, poring over Webby's notebook with drooping eyes. Donald

was already sleeping, with Louie half-sprawled into his lap, snoring away. His beak twitched occasionally, when Louie's feathers brushed his nose.

It was nice to see him back on the plane. Scrooge hadn't really expected him to agree, when the kids had proposed asking him. Had demanded they not leave until Donald could get the time off of work.

They had even snuck off to clean the houseboat, anything to take work off their uncle's plate so he could go. Scrooge was a bit jealous, he would admit; he didn't think any of the kids, bar possibly Webby, were nearly as excited to spend time with *him*.

But no matter; Donald was here, everyone was excited about it, and Scrooge was tentatively hopeful that they might be able to talk at some point. Maybe even get along, but he wasn't holding his breath. Since apparently he'd been approaching Donald wrong for almost *thirty years*.

He was still processing that one.

Hortense had always needed to burn off her temper before she was able to work through whatever had made her angry. No matter what they did or tried, she would not be calm until she had a good scream or brawl. Blow through the adrenaline that the rage brought until it was embers instead of a blaze, and then she was fine to solve the issue (assuming the issue wasn't solved by her fists already). He'd assumed that Donald was the same. He was *so* like his mother, in temperament if not looks, that at times Scrooge thought he was looking at a completely different duck. So it had seemed... reasonable that he would need the same things she had to get through the black temper. That Donald would *need* to scream and rage and rant, and when he was done, they could talk it through. It had certainly always seemed that way to Scrooge.

After Donald had let loose he certainly *seemed* calmer. Quietly tidying up anything he'd broken or disturbed, listening while Scrooge carefully re-approached whatever had set them off that time around.

Except apparently, to Donald, this had been Scrooge goading him *into* a rage, not helping him burn through it. Making the situation worse purely for Scrooge's own benefit. Every fight had just convinced Donald that Scrooge wanted to maintain some superiority, by being the calm one. The one that could be reasonable. Not that it was Scrooge's method of handling his temper and, occasionally, making up for being the cause. He deserved a good smack every now and again, he could admit that, why not let Donald have that satisfaction?

Scrooge could admit he wasn't good at apologizing. He didn't think that he was so bad he had needed *instructions,* and certainly not four different lectures! But he wasn't prone to admitting fault. He preferred to show it by his actions; if he stopped doing what had made them mad, that was better than just words, words that could mean nothing at all. He'd learned that words and promises meant little; it was better to prove that you understood what had gone wrong by never doing it again, by fixing what had broken. Surely you didn't need to do something so pointless as *say* it, when it would be obvious the issue was resolved?

Not, as he had learned, to his nephew, who had dryly said he could count on one hand the number of legitimate apologies he had ever received. After detailing exactly what he thought of Scrooge's methods of handling arguments.

He'd learned quite a bit, that day on the dock. He still remembered the brief whisper of air that had crossed his eyes as Donald's fist came flying. The shock when it didn't connect, the sheer confusion and then *horror* when Donald had told him 'You lose,' and it truly sunk in what he meant by those words.

Scrooge hadn't realized how badly his nephew thought of him until

that moment, in the realization that to Donald, the whole conversation was just some new manipulation. Some *game* that he was playing, not a genuine attempt to reconcile.

How many times had his actions been seen like that? How often did Donald feel like he was being played with?

He'd been shocked to be forgiven, honestly. That Donald had been willing to laugh at him, even have him at *dinner,* so shortly afterwards. As soon as Scrooge had admitted his poor opinion of his friends (boyfriends? Partners? Was there a difference?), Donald had been baffled, then downright amused, admitting that their recent meeting had been a joke, mostly at Scrooge's expense.

Had he learned that at the time, he would have been furious. Probably could have given Donald a run for his money, honestly. But now... He still didn't hold either Carioca or Pistoles in terribly high regard, but he would admit that they had risen, just slightly, in his eyes. At least they hadn't been lying to their apparent romantic partner.

Carioca's cold expression when he'd said that *he,* at least, did not forgive Scrooge had been... intriguing. Certainly off-putting, when the parrot had been so genial up to then, Scrooge had honestly felt the slightest amount of intimidation at the stern expression (and by Donald's expression, being called Senhor Scrooge had not been any kind of compliment). But it had also caught his attention in another way. Donald's partners had always seemed so playful and frivolous, taking nothing seriously and apparently dragging Donald into all manner of ridiculous antics. But that moment... he could abruptly see steel under those dark eyes, and he wondered.

Scrooge shook off his thoughts, focusing back on the adventure they were on. He needed to plan their route, consider what tricks they might run into, make sure that every angle he could see this early was covered.

Just- he just needed to close his eyes for a minute. It was just because he was getting a bit older, he needed to rest his eyes.

Just for a moment.

Scrooge woke with a start, jerking in his seat in confusion. When had he fallen asleep?

Come to think of it, when had he sat down? Hadn't he been using one of the storage crates as a desk?

Now he was in one of the seats, strapped in but not too tightly, a blanket carefully tossed over him. Louie was dozing against his shoulder.

Wait. Louie?

He glanced down, wondering if he had mistaken which duckling he had, but the green hoodie couldn't be anyone else.

But Donald had been sitting here before.

When he looked up, carefully, he found Donald sitting in the copilot's chair, chatting with Launchpad, while Della slept in the seat across from him, Dewey and Webby were both tipped in her direction,

tucked under her arms.

He slipped out from under Louie, sliding him down to lie against the armrest, cushioned by the abandoned blanket, and checked his watch. He'd been asleep for longer than expected, they were getting pretty close now. The sun was rising ahead of them, cresting over the mountains.

He walked up to the cockpit, leaning against Donald's chair. Launchpad was saying something as he reached them, but Scrooge was too slow to catch anything besides 'Drake.'

"Morning," Donald greeted first, sipping at a thermos, which he gestured with. "There's coffee in the pot if you need any."

Scrooge nodded, though he didn't intend to drink any. He preferred tea, and didn't bother loading the plane with tea bags.

"We're almost there, Mr. McD!" Launchpad told him cheerfully, eyes on the sky thankfully. With this many mountains, and Launchpad's propensity for crashing, Scrooge didn't like their chances of landing safely.

"Della's planning on handling the landing, she's just getting some rest for the trip. You said we could land close to the temple?" Donald continued; Scrooge glanced back at him.

"Aye, maps indicate that the old village was just below the building. Place is long abandoned, but I pulled a few satellite photos, looks like the land is clear enough. Shouldn't be a problem for our flight crew!" He explained; Donald nodded slowly.

They fell into silence, watching the mountains and clouds go by. Whatever Donald and Launchpad had been talking about before, they didn't continue it.

The kids eventually woke up and started bouncing around the plane; their excitement was contagious, and Scrooge found himself joining them in their manic chatter, explaining the legends associated with the temple and what he was expecting them to find.

A huge magical ruby, and a lot of ashes. But he didn't dwell on the latter; they would all be fine, they were *far* more experienced than the average adventurer!

Still, he reminded them all not to touch the ruby until he was able to determine how to safely remove it. The legends said that the ruby had been an object of worship, and obviously it had to have been moved to get in the temple in the first place, so clearly there was a safe way of moving it. They just had to figure out how.

Della woke last, just as Launchpad started their descent, and she bolted to the cockpit to assist without more than a brief 'goodmorning scuse me!'

Thankfully, the landing was smooth, setting down in the small valley next to what was supposedly the dormant volcano of the legend.

Launchpad offered to stay with the plane this time; normally he would have had to *repair* the plane, but this time around he just wanted to catch some sleep before they flew back out, and call his boyfriend. He looked giddy at the idea of it, clutching his phone with a grin as the rest of them disembarked.

Scrooge was waiting for the day Launchpad quit to live closer to

Drake. Moved on with his new partner and their little girl. Scrooge certainly wasn't looking forward to it, but it seemed inevitable. Another life flourishing and needing space to grow.

No matter how large he built his home, they all wanted to find their own eventually.

They set off. The ruins of the town they had landed in weren't far from the temple, only a short climb up crumbling stairs. There wasn't much vegetation around them, which was unusual for a volcanic area, even if this one was magically dormant.

The kids didn't notice; they peered at each broken down wall and cracked rock-face like it was their first time seeing them, dragging Donald hither and thither to peer at their discoveries like children half their age.

Scrooge glanced at the buildings as they passed. Most of them were entirely rotted away, only the occasional few stones in a line to indicate there had once been a building. Tall grasses grew across the plain. It was *cold,* sharp chill picking at his feathers; they probably should have worn heavier jackets. Or in Donald's case, a jacket at all. He didn't seem remotely bothered by the chill, hands casually at his side.

In the few more intact buildings, he could see old, worn hearth stones. Of mild interest, they weren't broken down or grown over. They were filthy, dirt tracked and brushed across them in streaks, but no plant growth.

"Hey guys, I can see the temple!" Della called out, as they rounded a small rocky corner, but this failed to draw the kids immediate attention. Donald, though, glanced up with some interest, as did Scrooge.

The temple, as they approached, looked like it was imitating a traditional cathedral, with the same spires and domes, but made of the local stone and clearly weathered. The exterior decorations, if there had ever been any, were long gone, and there were visible breaks in the stone that suggested the roof had collapsed in places. Any woodwork had long rotted away.

Still, it was an impressive sight, tucked away as it was. Huey stopped them all to take some photos, since, as he put it, 'most of the temples we visit collapse when we leave.' Webby and Dewey were both bouncing impatiently in wait, their movements synchronized, while Louie lingered by Donald.

"Well, let's get a move on!" Scrooge announced, starting the final march to the half-collapsed doorway, and they fell in line. A well-oiled machine, his adventure crew, and he felt himself grin with pride. They would rule the world one day, these kids. Whatever they wanted to accomplish, they would with ease.

Donald stumbled, letting out a squawk, and nearly tumbled as they picked their way through the entrance. Della snorted a laugh; Scrooge rolled his eyes. He couldn't fully understand how Donald could still be so *clumsy*.

There wasn't much of the roof left in the first hall, so they had a good view of what had originally been there. It was a large space, with the remaining floor suggesting it had once been tiled, and the walls were high. Probably an intimidating and awesome space once, but now it was just the stop-off point for them to fish out flashlights before venturing towards the large doorway opposite.

Unlike the first entrance, this doorway had stone doors, still completely intact but thankfully open. There were runes and symbols carved into them, but the open ceiling had clearly let weather in, so

they were little more than smudges and dents now. The room beyond was still dark, which gave him some hope that the rest of the temple would be in better shape.

“Ooh, do you think this temple was devoted to Svarozhits?” Webby asked as they moved in; her flashlight darted around the room rapidly, too fast for Scrooge to see what she was seeing.

“Why would they worship a ruby *and* a god?” Louie asked, just a shade sarcastically. Webby either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“Well, since a volcanic eruption would be fire related, they could have considered the ruby a relic of him! Or, or! Maybe it was made as an offering!”

“Wouldn’t an eruption be considered a divine punishment? Like, they angered, er-” Huey started, then hesitated.

“Svarozhits,” Donald finished absently, flashlight firmly planted on the floor in front of him.

“Bless you,” Della quipped, slipping to the front of the group to walk confidently into the room. Scrooge winced, waiting for some trap to trigger, but for once, nothing was amiss.

“Hey, I think I found a lightswitch!” Dewey called out; Scrooge whirled around to look for him. Found Donald already there, eyeing the lever Dewey was tugging on. He glanced back at Scrooge, eyebrow quirked.

“Could be for the lights,” Scrooge said after a moment, looking

around. There was nothing clearly attached to it, and the position in the corner of the room seemed an odd fit for a trap. And this *had* been a temple at one point, so not everything would be a trap; some things would have been for the people who ran the temple or coming to worship. Donald seemed to agree, and he added his weight to press the lever down.

There was a spark of warmth, and a flare of light as several stone bowls, set into the walls, lit up with fire in a breath. There was no obvious fuel.

“Guess that confirms there’s a magic stone thingy around here,” Louie said blandly, poking one of the bowls with mild interest.

There were a dozen bowls in total, lining the walls of the long, fairly narrow room, with doors branching off either side. None of the doors were very decorative, so Scrooge ignored them in favor of the largest one at the end, which lacked any visible handles.

This one still had legible carvings; Webby launched herself across the room to begin writing them down, vibrating in excitement, Huey only a few steps behind her.

Leaving them to it, Scrooge continued to look around. Besides the door, the walls were largely bare, but there were very worn holes along the roof line that suggested that there were previously wall hangings here. Tapestries, maybe, or woven rugs, but whatever they had been was long decayed.

Dewey and Della were poking around the room, looking for any other triggers while Webby and Huey muttered over the door.

Donald tapped his fingers on the stone lever. He hadn’t walked on yet,

peering around the room with a frown.

“Something feels off,” he muttered, more to himself than anything, but Scrooge moved closer anyway. Much as he teased his nephew about being overly cautious, he was usually worth listening to.

“What’s caught your attention, lad?” He asked; Donald didn’t jump, but he did twitch, grip tightening on the stone before he settled and looked back at him.

“Something doesn't add up,” he confessed, looking around again. Scrooge frowned, peering after him to try and see what he was seeing. All he found was an old, worn down building that was long past its prime. The only things of interest here were the magical flames.

“Care to explain?”

“Just- why are the lights off, and the doors shut, if everyone that’s come here died? It’s not like a corpse would have put everything away, and there's nobody living in the area to clean up after.” Donald asked. “Usually if a temple is reset there's someone around to do it. I think we’re missing something.”

Scrooge scoffed before he could help it.

Donald was worth *listening* to, but he tended to focus on the most trivial of things.

“When they're *physical* traps, sure, but it’s a magic temple, lad, it’s hardly surprising that some things get tidied up on their own,” he said bracingly, slapping Donald on the back. Donald coughed, lurching a

bit at the unexpected contact, then scowled.

“Why would they have the lever at *all* if it just *magically resets?* ” He demanded; Scrooge ignored him, walking to the other end of the room. Magic hardly had to make *sense,* people that used it would use a spell just to light a match! He'd yet to find a problem that couldn't be solved with hard work and quick wits, even a magical one.

“Hi Uncle Scrooge!” Webby chirped when he reached them. “We think this door is writing the whole story of the gemstone!”

“We’re having a bit of trouble translating the whole thing though, but we found the words for fire and magic for sure!” Huey added, pointing at what Scrooge assumed were the relevant runes; he wasn’t an expert.

“Yeah, it’s kinda weird, cause they used the word for gem and what I *think* the word for mage is interchangeably in some places, but I think they might mean it metaphorically, since the story says they died to make the gemstone?” Webby continued, less certain.

“Forget all of that, how do we get the door *open?* ” Dewey demanded, trotting up with Della and Louie in tow. He elbowed his way between Webby and Huey to run rapid fingers across the seam in the stone, pressing against the surface.

“Don’t you worry laddie, there’s sure to be another lever or switch around here,” Scrooge proclaimed, moving up to the door. There were no obvious signs of anything by the door, but he’d found all manner of tricky doors in old temples and castles. Stones on the floor, triggers that activated in the light, things that needed to be held to a flame to activate, and that was without the ones that were magic.

Everyone crowded in, looking for the way to open the doors. Dewey,

after getting elbowed twice, circled away with a grumble to check the other rooms, in case those had the way of opening the main doors. Donald went with him, Louie trailing after without a word.

Fine, they could search elsewhere. Scrooge scoured the walls again, pressing on any stones that looked even slightly out of place, any deviations on the floor that could be a pressure plate. The floor was smooth, and filthy, but there was nothing to find.

He glanced up; Della was tapping over the walls one brick at a time, holding a light at different angles to try to reveal any hidden insignias or symbols that might indicate a puzzle or clue.

Webby and Huey had disappeared; Scrooge paused, frowning, before he spotted them vanishing into another one of the side rooms. Donald and the other two boys emerged from another, leaving the door open behind them; the room beyond was also lit by a flame set into the wall, but there was nothing inside except what appeared to be the rotted remains of a cot.

Sure, it was certainly possible the trigger was in one of the side rooms, instead of in this main atrium, if only to protect the gemstone itself from the general villagers. They really didn't know who ran the temple, or how it had been run, so they couldn't technically rule anything out. He was just being thorough, and it was *more* likely the latch was in the main room. Donald and the kids could search the rest-

The doors groaned and slowly, *slowly,* began to shift open.

“Yes! Unca Donald, that was it!”

Louie reappeared, cheering, with Dewey in tow. Donald emerged from the room a moment later, covered in cobwebs.

“There was a lever in the storage room,” he explained, but Scrooge was already walking to the next room, unbothered. Good, the kids had found the lever; always good to let them find the solution to the puzzle, let them get in practice solving these kinds of things.

“Why wouldn’t it be in the same room as the doors?” Huey asked the room at large. Donald started an explanation, more or less what Scrooge had surmised already, while they made their way through the doorway.

The beyond room was entirely circular, with a rounded dome for a ceiling and lit with magic flames, just like the previous. Again, there were signs that tapestries or something similar had once hung on the walls, but nothing but the holes and a few broken brackets remained. Several pillars ran an interior line perhaps midway in, arranged in a smaller circle and stopping about ten feet high. Just wide enough to hide behind, and there was no clear reason for them being here; had they once held a second floor? Or some kind of decoration? They weren’t decorative themselves, they looked plain and as filthy as the rest of the building had been.

Three of them had collapsed entirely, leaving small stumps about chest height, and the remains of the stonework lay crumbled on the ground.

There was nothing else in the room except a tall pedestal in the exact center, but nothing was on it. Scrooge paused when he noticed this; had the ruby been successfully stolen already? The legends only spoke of the fate of anyone who tried to take it, but it wasn’t unusual for someone to have stolen a treasure and kept it a secret. NObody would be coming to steal it if they didn't know where it was, after all.

He stepped forward, ahead of the children, to confirm if their trip had been a waste of time. It wouldn’t be the first time, these things

happened on a decent number of their adventures in truth, but the kids would be disappointed. So would he, if he was honest; he enjoyed adventures, the danger, the excitement, spending time with his family and seeing new things, but he liked a physical prize to go home with. Something to remember they accomplished something.

And honestly, this adventure had been pretty bland. One small puzzle, that was it? Between this and the truth telling scroll, adventures with Donald lately were turning out to be pretty dull.

Well, there had apparently been FOWL at the last one, but Scrooge hadn’t seen them; *none* of them had besides Donald, who had managed to slip away. Instead of fighting them, which seemed out of character for him. He hadn't explained *why* he'd run either, so Scrooge was left to guess. Despite Donald occasionally acting the coward, when push came to shove he *wasn't,* so there had to be an actual reason he'd decided to retreat.

Focusing back on this treasure, he stepped closer. Nothing happened, and he frowned. He was about to order a full search of the room and the rest of the temple, but as soon as he stepped past the circle of pillars, a red light rose from the pedestal, a gemstone glowing with an internal power slowly coming into view.

There was a moment, a brief peaceful moment, that Scrooge thought they would be able to get through things smoothly. The security settings weren’t going off immediately, they would be able to find a way to remove the gem and leave.

Then the first blast of *red* and *heat* blasted just past his ear, knocking his hat askew, and he dove to drop behind a pillar with a muffled swear. Of course it wouldn’t be that easy, it never was!

He grinned. *This* was the best part of adventuring!

Everyone scattered, darting behind the other pillars; Dewey and Webby were together, Louie was peering out from Donald's back. Huey and Della had their own pillars near the doorway, which had slammed shut behind them, glowing an ominous red.

No choice but to finish this, then, or the room would remain sealed. They would have to get that gemstone; it was clearly powering the doors as well as the lights.

Huh, apparently Donald *had* been right about the doors. Not that a trap, well, trapping them was terribly unusual.

Scrooge darted to another pillar; the gem was *also* powering the security system, gotta remember that. Donald appeared briefly, eyes darting not to the gem, but to the other pillars, before his face vanished in a plume of smoke and disintegrated stone.

The filthy floor abruptly seemed more grisly; these blasts supposedly incinerated anyone they hit, after all.

He shot out of hiding again, drawing fire, and ducked behind one of the piles of rubble. He heard a yelp, and twisted around again to check, but it looked like Huey had tripped; Webby was pulling him back to safety.

Della gave him a wave, appearing from her own hiding place, then shot back to dodge another blast.

"I think we need to reach the platform to stop it!" She called out over the chaos; the blasts were coming faster now, going every which way, so none of them could easily move, let alone get closer.

The stone at his back groaned with another hit. And they wouldn't have cover forever.

"I think I can get closer!" Webby shouted, appearing for a moment, before Huey dragged her back with an 'oof!'

"Not without cover! The blasts are too fast to dodge, and there's nothing to hide behind!" Donald snapped; he'd appeared at Scrooge's left, Louie still in tow. Louie was huddled in his hood; he always did that when they were facing dangerous traps that couldn't be out-thought. As he'd put it a while back, this was the 'Uh oh' moment after the 'wait, what?' that was usually one of them setting off a trap.

"Well, maybe if we all move at once we can overwhelm it? It's only blasting one at a time!" Della called, a few pillars away.

"We'll need to be more spread out for that!" Scrooge interjected; if they all ran for the same cover, the plan would fall apart.

"Wait-" Donald began, twisting to peer out again.

"We can't wait here forever for you to make up your-" Scrooge started to snarl-

" *Dewey!"* Donald *screamed,* the word torn bloody from his throat, and he was gone. Scrooge shot forward, to grab him? To race after him?

Dewey was standing in front of the rubble, cornered by the large stones. A blast of red was shooting right at him, and there was

nowhere for him to go.

Time seemed to slow, even as Scrooge's feet pounded the ground, desperate to stop what was inevitable. His limbs moving through sap in the winter.

Step. The light was so *red* and *angry,* and someone was screaming, he was screaming.

Step. The air sizzled.

Step. Step stepstep *step*-

Donald reached Dewey first. Dewey's tearful face and wide, wide eyes vanished behind Donald's back.

Donald's back disappeared in a blast of red red *red.*

Inevitable. His kids were in danger. Donald would always be there for his kids.

Scrooge was always too slow.

His feet stumbled, stopped. The air was heavy and silent. Smoke and dust rose in a thick cloud.

And he waited to watch his son die.

Interlude: Louie - Eyes Open

Chapter Notes

> Posting early because of family stuff this week, so here you go everyone!

Everything was quiet. Breath heaved, the air crackled, and there was a funny twinkling sound behind him, but somehow it was still so *quiet.*

Louie darted forward, but had to stop, because there was so much red, and the smell of burning was overwhelming, and he couldn't look, he *couldn't,* but he had to, he had to know-!

"Don?" Mom asked, behind him.

Unca Donald shuddered. Once he started, it didn't seem like he could *stop,* he just kept *shaking,* and Webby had said that the gemstone *incinerated people-*

Unca Donald straightened. Slowly, achingly slowly. His arms fell to his sides. Dewey was still pinned between him and the stone, and he wasn't moving.

"Unca Donald?"

A hissed breath. His head twitched, like he was trying to nod, but couldn't. He stepped backwards, and turned.

His face was twisted and grimaced, eyes squinted as though in a bright tunnel. Even nearly closed, they were clearly glowing *red.*

“Lad?”

Unca Donald was still shaking, hands loose at his sides. His face turned to look at each of them, like he did at every adventure, every grocery store. Counting, checking, and for a moment Louie almost thought he was fine. Cause if he was checking on *them,* he had to be fine, right?

But he didn’t speak; his beak was gritted tight, and when he turned, his back was more than red, it looked like it was still *burning.*

“Donald!” Scrooge demanded, stomping forward, eyes creased with worry, or annoyance, it was so hard to tell with him, and he grabbed Unca Donald’s shoulder. Just for a moment.

Unca Donald let out a *shriek,* harsh and so loud, like he had been holding it in until that moment, like it had been ripped out of him, and Louie felt like he was going to cry; he’d never heard him so hurt sounding. Never.

Uncle Scrooge jumped back, guilty, hand clutched to his chest like *he* was the hurt one. His fingers were tinged with ash.

“Um,” Webby said, behind them. Louie turned, trying to look at everything at once, and saw that Webby was holding the shattered remains of the ruby.

“You… broke it?” Huey asked, tentative, he wasn’t even looking at Unca Donald, why wasn’t he looking, they had to look, cause if they looked away-

“It was already broken. I think it shattered when it hit- um,” Webby started, before she hiccuped and a wet sound came from her beak, but Louie didn’t look again. He had to watch Unca Donald. If he didn’t everything would go wrong, but as long as he was watching, nothing would happen, Unca Donald wouldn’t let it.

Unca Donald started walking. He didn’t look at any of them, just started walking back to the doors.

The open doors.

Dewey was clutching his hand, and Louie wanted to hold the other one, but then he couldn’t watch, so he walked right behind. Uncle Scrooge made some noise, but he wasn’t Unca Donald, so Louie didn’t care.

Webby stepped next to him. She was holding the gemstone fragments.

They weren’t glowing anymore. Maybe they had used up the last of their power…?

Nope. Didn’t matter.

Huey slipped ahead, checking the doors, looking back constantly. Louie thought he heard Uncle Scrooge and mom following behind, but he didn’t really care.

Unca Donald’s back was still a glowing angry, awful red, the shirt completely gone and hanging from his shoulders. He walked straight,

stiff.

His shoulders trembled, and each breath sounded pained.

Keep watching, Louie reminded himself, as they reached the room with all the doors. The lights were dimming as they walked, but they flared when Unca Donald passed.

Just keep watching, and nothing will happen.

Mom and Uncle Scrooge kept *talking,* asking Unca Donald questions and trying to stop and look at the temple walls, and Louie wanted to turn and scream at them to just *shut up.*

But that would mean he had to turn around.

Huey was still leading. Dewey hadn't spoken. His shoulders were hunched, and he was holding Unca Donald's hand with both of his own, gripping tight. Webby sniffled behind him.

Unca Donald's back was still a fiery burning red, and Louie could feel the heat rising off of it from several feet away.

They kept walking.

Outside, the sky seemed dimmer, or maybe it was because Unca Donald seemed to be glowing *brighter.* He walked so stiff, like each step hurt. Uncle Scrooge and Mom had finally stopped talking, but now they were edging forwards towards Unca Donald, like they

wanted to help him walk, but not actually reaching out.

Each building and ruin they walked past held a hearthstone, and now every single one was lit. The valley looked like it was inhabited by ghosts.

Louie shuddered, and Webby took his hand. Had the walk been so long the first time?

The moment the plane was in view, Mom took off running, sliding carefully around Unca Donald before leaving a dust trail in her wake, screaming for Launchpad. Louie couldn't hear his response, but he could hear the plane's engines start up. Dewey twitched, like he wanted to run forward.

Uncle Scrooge had slid next to Unca Donald, hovering by his shoulder but not touching him. His face was pale, where Louie could see it; there was a thin layer of ash covering all of them, and Uncle Scrooge's hat was low on his head, shading his eyes.

Huey peeled off next, darting into the plane with his guide in hand.

"It'll be alright lad, we'll find a- you'll be fine," Uncle Scrooge was saying under his breath, whether to Unca Donald or to himself wasn't clear. Unca Donald didn't seem to even hear him; he didn't stop moving until he got inside the plane, each step shaky and stiff.

His face was so pale and sweaty, and his eyes, still squeezed nearly shut, were glowing red behind his lashes.

The minute Unca Donald reached the cargo area, he stopped, and

shaking, trembling, started to sit down. Dewey slid under his arm, Uncle Scrooge under the other, and Louie could only stand there, Webby holding his hand.

“Do you want something to sit on?” He asked, before he could help it, but it didn’t matter, Unca Donald either didn’t hear him or chose not to reply. His beak was still clenched shut, and his face was wet.

“Get ready for takeoff!” Launchpad shouted from the cockpit.

“Donald, you should…” Uncle Scrooge started, but paused. Unca Donald had opened his eyes to look at him. He was still shaking. His eyes were an awful, glowing *red*.

“Lads, Webby darlin’, go sit down. I’ll stay with Donald, alright?”

Louie was already shaking his head, letting Webby go to hold his hands in front of him, like he could ward the idea off.

“No, no, we gotta stay, we can’t -” If he left, anything could happen! He couldn’t leave!

“You can still see from up there, and it’ll make your uncle happy to know you’re all safe for takeoff,” Uncle Scrooge insisted, reaching out for his hands. Louie shuffled back, but not fast enough. Uncle Scrooge’s grip was gentle. His face looked so worn, he looked his age for once.

“Let’s just get in the air, lad, and we can all come back down to help,” Uncle Scrooge continued.

Louie let himself be led to the seats. Let himself be buckled in next to Dewey, who curled into himself and didn't look at anyone. Webby was on his other side; she was still holding the ruby shards. They were so dull now. Worthless.

He could see Unca Donald's head from his seat, if he leaned as far forward as he could. So he saw when Huey approached Unca Donald, holding a bottle of water. He asked something. Unca Donald shifted just slightly, almost a nod.

Huey poured the water onto his back. There was a *sizzle* and a burst of steam, and Unca Donald let out a choked shout. Louie strained forward, eyes wide, what was *happening-*

Unca Donald sighed, shoulders loosening, and his eyes opened again. He said something short to Huey. Then his eyes closed again. Uncle Scrooge frowned, darting back to the ladder to head down, while Huey nodded grimly and came up the other side.

By the time Uncle Scrooge got down, Unca Donald was sitting cross-legged and still, eyes closed. Hands in his lap. Uncle Scrooge asked him something, but got no response, and sighed, going to grab hold of some of the cargo straps.

Huey sat on Webby's other side. Launchpad and Mom started the pre-flight checklist, rapidly, and the Cloud Slayer started to move.

"What's going on? Did he say what we can do? What was with the water?" Webby asked; it wasn't her usual excited tone, but a frantic jumble, and her hands gripped the straps so tight her knuckles were white.

“He- I thought, it’s just a burn, right? A magic burn, and you’re supposed to cool it off. We’ve got water bottles, so… I think it helped. He asked me to do that on a schedule,” Huey explained, hands wringing.

“Couldn’t we just use them all at once? Maybe put it out? Cause it looked like it was still burning…” Webby asked. Louie nodded in agreement.

“No, that was the other thing he said. Um, magic problem, magic fix,” Huey said.

“So, we need to cast some *other* spell?” Dewey asked quietly, on the other side. The plane continued to rise. Dewey still wasn’t looking at them.

“Uh, maybe? He seemed a bit more awake after the water, maybe we can ask after- after the next one,” Huey offered.

They sat in silence for a long time. Louie could see Unca Donald leaning to the side with the plane as they rose; Scrooge was sitting next to him, supporting them both with the cargo straps, but he was clearly trying to touch him as little as possible, so it was difficult.

“It wasn’t your fault, Dewey,” Louie said, staring at Unca Donald below.

Dewey huffed.

“I’m the one that got cornered, *I’m* the one that didn’t check what was behind me, didn’t wait to try to get to the gemstone, I’m the one that

Unca Donald had to protect, and now he's got a weird *fire spell* all over him that everyone said would burn him to ashes!" Dewey ranted, pulling against his straps to turn and glare at him. His face was wet with tears, streaking the ashes and dust coating every feather.

Louie reached out to tug at Dewey's feathers, brushing away some of the dust. Dewey's face screwed up, and a fresh batch of tears started down his face.

"Not your fault," Louie repeated, because Unca Donald would want him to. Because Unca Donald was going to be fine, and he wouldn't want Dewey to think it was his fault.

He'd seen where Dewey was standing; he'd been closer to the gem than any of them. He could see why he'd thought he could make it.

And the fire blasts wouldn't have stopped until the gem was broken.

"Louie's right, Dewey. It was an accident," Huey added from behind him. Dewey's eyes darted between them, sniffling.

"I- I was the one that wanted him to come," Dewey choked out. "If I hadn't-"

"We *all* wanted him to come with Dewey, that isn't your fault either," Webby insisted. "We're gonna fix it, and everything will be fine! We can- I'll call Lena as soon as we're in range, she's magic!"

"But she doesn't know any spells!" Dewey protested, rubbing the tears from his face.

“Maybe Unca Donald has a spellbook or something? It sounded like he knew what to do,” Huey mumbled, rummaging through his Woodchucks manual. He didn’t seem like he was looking for anything specifically, he was probably doing it as a nervous habit.

None of them said anything for a long time. Louie didn’t know if Unca Donald would have any spell books. It had become really obvious lately that they didn’t know much at all about their uncle, despite being raised by him. Having a spellbook somewhere wouldn’t even be weird at this point.

“... how many water bottles do we have?” Dewey asked after a moment.

“After accounting for how many we’ll each need to drink, we should have 18 left. So if the flight takes as long as it did coming here, we’ll have one every forty minutes,” Huey explained carefully.

“Can we split the bottles in half and go every twenty instead?” Louie asked. He leaned forward again; Unca Donald hadn’t moved, but Uncle Scrooge had shifted to sit next to him, straps gathered around like a safety net.

“Um… maybe? If half is enough, that would spread it out better…” Huey trailed off nervously.

The plane leveled out. Louie was already out of his seat and darting to the ladder before he heard Launchpad call out they could move.

He skipped steps at a time, falling down the last few with a painful *thud,* rolling through the landing to get to Unca Donald’s side.

Louie sat down, cross legged, facing his uncle so he couldn't see his back. Unca Donald's eyes were still closed, beak still clenched. His hands clenched and relaxed periodically, and despite everything, his breaths were slow and even.

"Lad, are you sure that you want us to fly home? We could find that Viking village, maybe their freezing spell would…" Scrooge suggested, leaning around from where he was standing to look at Louie as well. Unca Donald didn't react.

"Lad-" he continued. Huey appeared out of nowhere, elbowing Uncle Scrooge out of the way to carefully pour half over the glowing flames.

Unca Donald's expression relaxed a bit, a sigh slipping out of his lips.

"N'ice. Don't n'd two prblms," he muttered, barely audible over the plane and his own scratchy voice.

"What's that?" Mom asked, appearing with a jaunty step. The skin around her eyes was tight, and her smile was strained. "What other problems? Cause I gotta agree, think we've got enough right now."

"I was thinking of that Viking village in the desert, actually," Uncle Scrooge said, in an almost guilty tone. Mom's face lit up.

"Oh! Yeah, that would freeze you solid, Don! That would put out the fire for sure!"

Freeze him *solid?!*

"Won't help," Unca Donald insisted, his voice choked and face twisting further. His breathing was stuttered.

"Donald, come on, you're literally on fire right now, magic ice would obviously fix it!"

Unca Donald growled, eyes clenching tighter.

"Lass, tell Launchpad to adjust course, Donald can be stubborn on someone else's time," Uncle Scrooge commanded, eyeing Unca Donald as he shifted like he wanted to turn to look at them. The fire glowed brighter.

Louie's eyes darted from Uncle Scrooge's face to Mom's excited one, then to Unca Donald's pained and unhappy one.

"No."

Everyone turned to look at him. Louie blinked, almost surprised he had spoken. But he had to continue.

"Unca Donald said no. We're going home," Louie insisted. How could they think of doing something that Unca Donald was clearly worried about? *He* didn't think it would put out the fire, so Louie didn't either.

Everything would be fine, because Unca Donald always made sure things were fine. So they had to listen to Unca Donald.

“I agree with Louie,” Huey added, walking to stand next to him. Louie leaned subtly on his shoulder. “Unca Donald says no.”

“Lads, we can get there a lot faster than going all the way home and hoping we find a solution there,” Uncle Scrooge said, clearly trying to be calming, but also obviously irritated that they were arguing with him. Mom nodded.

“We’re only a few hours away from the village, and the ice will put out the fire!”

“Or it won’t, and we’ve wasted time getting where *Unca Donald* wants to go!” Louie snapped.

“Louie, sweetie, your uncle isn’t really in the best space to be making decisions like that,” Mom said soothingly, hands raised in front of her. Louie scowled. He didn’t want her soothing him, he wanted them to *listen.*

Webby and Dewey slid over, pillows from storage in their arms.

“Lad, they have magic freezers; we can get the fire low enough to plan more, and even if we still go home, we might be able to help Donald in the meantime. You don’t want him to be in pain when he didn’t have to be,” Uncle Scrooge added.

“Freezers?” Dewey asked. He slid next to Huey.

“They want to take us to some weird magic Viking village with *freezers,* cause they want to *freeze* the *fire,* but Unca Donald said no and they aren’t *listening,”* Louie snarked, crossing his arms.

“We can’t do that!” Webby exclaimed, eyes wide. “Unca Donald said-” But then she stopped, biting her lip, arms wrapped around her.

“Webby?” Huey asked, reaching out to rest a hand on her shoulder. She whimpered, tears wet in her eyes.

“He said that he *died* when that happened, ” she whispered, like a secret, and Louie felt the world collapsing around him.

No. No no *no.* He was fine. It was fine. He was going to be just *fine-*

“Webby, darlin’,” Uncle Scrooge said, face pale and blank, “what did you say?”

She sniffled.

“Webby?” Mom asked, staring.

“He said- that he got frozen, and his- his heart stopped, and that he died, cause there was a prophecy, and- and- we can’t do that!” She wailed, and collapsed on her knees. Huey sunk with her, Dewey a second behind, while Louie glared at the two adults that were causing all of this.

“What if he just gets stuck in an ice cube and is still on fire in the middle?” He demanded, and when he got no answer he plopped down next to his siblings. “We’re gonna listen to Unca Donald, and he said we’re going home.”

This time, nobody argued.

Huey's timer went off. He poured out the water. Unca Donald relaxed a bit, breathed easier. He didn't open his eyes, but he did whisper a thank you.

Louie stayed where he was; his siblings leaned against him, or he leaned against them. He tried to match his uncle's breathing best he could.

Above him Uncle Scrooge paced, moving between the railing and the cockpit, occasionally coming down the ladder to check in. He kept asking Unca Donald things. And kept looking troubled, or disappointed, when Unca Donald didn't respond.

Mom stayed in the cockpit. She had sat with them, for a bit, looking around the cargo hold like it was the most fascinating thing in the world, before she went to 'help Launchpad,' and vanished.

Dewey kept trying to distract them, with videos or games, but each one petered out after a while. Huey kept worrying he would miss the timer going off, Webby was unenthusiastic as best.

Louie didn't want to take his eyes off of Unca Donald.

Timer went off. Water poured out. Unca Donald sighed.

There were so many hours left of the flight.

Scrooge paced. Mom was nowhere to be seen. Launchpad appeared, face shockingly grim, and patted them each gently on the shoulder.

"Hey, we're gonna fix this. Your uncle's a tough guy, he's not gonna let this stop him, alright?" He said gently, making sure each of them was looking at him. Louie nodded. It *would* be fine.

Unca Donald would be fine.

Timer went off. Water poured out. Unca Donald sighed.

Louie wished they could add all the water at once. He wanted the fire *out.* He wanted Unca Donald to open his eyes again, to *tell* them that everything was fine.

But Unca Donald said that it wouldn't help. They were listening to Unca Donald. Because if they didn't, that would mean admitting they didn't know what they were doing, that they didn't know how to *fix* this!

So. Timer went off. Water poured out. Unca Donald sighed.

And they sat and waited for the next timer.

It was a long flight.

Interlude: Panchito - Hearth Fire

Panchito couldn't sleep. Something was off, but he couldn't say what. José was settled against him, dozing but not quite asleep. The room was quiet, and comfortably cool, and there was something *wrong*.

He reached to touch the amulet. There was only José's sleepy contentment to be felt there. Which was to be expected, Donald was traveling with his family and thus should be too far away to be felt. His cold waves were gone, again. Either teh distance itself, or Donald cutting off contact to *handle* the distance.

He *had* been getting better at keeping the connection open, it had been so wonderful lately to feel Donald again! But the trip meant that they were separate again, so soon after their talk. A talk that Panchito hadn't wanted to have, afraid to push things too soon after their long separation. He had *wanted* to give them all some more time, to settle back into a new routine. He could be patient, no matter what José had said!

The airport had just been far too exciting, and it wasn't as if Donald had argued!

But the whole discussion and whatnot in St. Canard had been earlier than he intended. Well, intended was a bit of a stretch, he hadn't *planned* a specific time to talk about Donald's distance, and the dangers he always seemed to find.

He hadn't planned his panicked, half-awake chase into the city to find Donald, half-asleep himself, sitting in a diner with a duck that Panchito didn't yet know.

Even then, he would have waited until the next morning to talk, knew

they both needed sleep, but Donald could tell something was off, and he never liked to let these things fester. So they'd talked in the car, and the next morning had been interrupted by Gladstone anyway, so that was probably for the best.

Getting pulled, even a little, into one of Donald's ongoing issues hadn't been a plan either, but it was one less thing his partner needed to do, and it was just poking around an old, abandoned building. Gladstone had even been able to join him, so clearly whatever his luck was protecting him from had no longer been a danger.

The redhead who he'd caught a photo of had interested Donald, clearly. So that was good! He'd been able to help! Opening up had been *good,* and he just needed to make sure that Donald remembered that, so next time he wouldn't hesitate!

Because he loved Donald. He wanted him safe, and happy. But Donald was bad at allowing others to help him. Letting people in, leaning on them emotionally or physically. When he had a problem, he complained when he could, then sucked it in and dealt with it. Not always well, and he often got hurt, but he didn't like to wait for help that he never seemed to expect to arrive.

The worst time had been when he had sailed back to Duckburg alone for 'one last adventure' with his family. That was how he put it, though Panchito and José both had been doubtful about the wording. Della and Scrooge, give up adventure? They had thought it unlikely, at best.

As had Donald, but as he'd revealed over the phone later, Della was pregnant. Even she knew the babies wouldn't be able to go out for a while, that their adventures were too dangerous for newborns, so the 'last adventure' would be a huge one to celebrate their birth, before a long break. Last for a while, apparently, and Donald hadn't known what he would do, because he didn't want to stay in Duckburg, but how could he leave them? Tiny little babies, just scans from an

ultrasound, then white, faceless eggs, and he already loved them fit to burst.

And then, well. That last adventure with his uncle and sister became a long adventure in being a single dad. And the distance was too hard to handle, too much emptiness in their relationship and their connections and the timing of their calls dwindled, until finally, they had to admit that things weren't working. That they *couldn't* work, not until they could be close again.

Panchito hadn't resented it. Not even when Donald had insisted he didn't want to leave Duckburg, just in case. The babies, and Scrooge himself (even if Donald didn't like to admit it), had taken priority. José had taken the airline job, finding joy in traveling even if it wasn't quite the way he had always wanted to, and that led to long hours in strange countries or in the air. Away from the ground, and out of contact.

Panchito hadn't let it get to him.

He had *wanted* to, had wanted to find that anger that usually came so easily to Donald. Maybe in anger he could find some peace with things. But all he had felt was sad, and resigned, with only the hope of someday. Someday Donald would be able to leave, or they would be able to get dual citizenship.

Someday. Panchito held onto his hope like a raging bull, clinging to it with blisters on his hands and aches in his soul. It hadn't been *easy,* staying certain that they would get here. But he refused to let it go. Every morning he hoped until it hurt that he was getting closer. Every night came with the hope that the night was one less night he would spend alone.

Someday had finally come, and they were together again, finding each

other in the twelve years of distance, and Panchito couldn't be happier.

Well, unless they could all somehow *live* together again, but one bridge at a time. José was here, and Ari and Humphrey too. Donald was so close now, after so many years and miles apart. Just a few minutes away by car, moments away by phone.

And right now, half a world away on a plane to Russia for a new adventure with his family.

Was that why he felt so off right *now* ? Had Panchito gotten used to that feeling of Donald's openness so quickly that even this short break was bothering him?

But it had been a few days already, they were technically on their way *back,* and it was only *now* that things felt off. Surely if it was going to bother him enough to keep him up all hours of the night, he would have felt that as soon as Donald moved out of range?

He leaned further into the pillows, staring at the ceiling. It was too dark to make out details; he couldn't see the stone ceiling or the Mexico flag pinned to one wall, the photos displayed around it.

It was probably just something he ate. Maybe that pizza *had* been left out too long-

Panchito shot up, gasping for air, as a wave of *heat* and *pain* and *help!* blasted through him like an air horn. It was an intense, overwhelming feeling. Beside him, José let out a muted shriek, curling in on himself as he clearly felt the same rush.

Behind it all, under the awful pain, terror and strange, echoing desperation, was a familiar deep blue.

Donald. It was Donald.

Without a thought, Panchito forced his eyes closed, shoved the feelings of *panic* and *fear* and *what happened?!* down and away so he could dive into the fire where there should be cool waters.

The fire felt thick, liquid instead of the lightness of sunlight or the crackle of a bonfire. It clung, it covered, and underneath he could feel Donald struggling, putting everything into keeping the fire *out*. Panchito jumped in, as much as one could jump in a magical mindscape anyway, and grabbed hold.

It was like wrestling an octopus. There were limbs *everywhere,* slippery and hard to grasp, and every time he had one it seemed to disappear and two more formed. Each one was trying to grab Donald's deep blue self, and he felt so *tired,* under the agony and terror. Every bit of his focus on the problem, his energy clearly near nothing.

How long had he *been* like this?

A pleasant breeze slipped in, soothing and smelling of incense. Green. José slipped into the mess, not grasping but prying, sliding underneath the flailing fiery limbs to reach Donald, pressing at any gaps he could.

Panchito tried a different tactic, pulling at the fire itself to see if he could bring the temperature down. No such thing as a *cold* fire, after all!

Which seemed to work a bit, and the flames became heavier, easier to manage, still somehow more liquid than fire, but he still couldn't get a grip, and he could feel some new, desperate horror that didn't seem to belong to any of them.

José seemed to find an opening, because suddenly he was pushing the fire *away* from Donald, and Panchito could finally get a grip on what felt like the bulk of it and dragged it further off, feeling it scramble in his arms. As soon as Donald was freed he twisted to grab at the flames, driving them down with his own cold waves. Panchito had never welcomed the chill more.

Donald's power was always cold at best; when he was calm it was the soothing cool of a deep pool in the heat of summer. When he was angry it was the roiling, choking waves of a stormy sea.

Now he was *enraged,* and the water was a thrashing typhoon. But it lacked the energy it should have, he was clearly running on fumes and couldn't do much more than push the fire away from himself. José was focused on cocooning Donald, soothing and trying to heal the damage, so it fell to Panchito to handle the attacker.

But as he gathered it up, grabbing at the heat and tempering it down, he found that every grasping limb still reached desperately for Donald as he dragged it away. Not violent, only panicked. Funny, he would have thought it would reach for Panchito now, since he was closer to it.

Pity the amulets couldn't give them a better communication method; he could express his confusion and curiosity, but they weren't clear questions, and they were buried anyway underneath the stronger feelings of concern and relief.

Was this some kind of spell? It felt like a living thing, and it was

terrified, that didn't seem to match a spell or attack. And Donald had been with his family, he would have mentioned if he expected them to be attacked by a magic user…

If he knew, anyway. Panchito remembered the magic ice incident. Donald certainly hadn't expected to come home frozen solid.

Still, as he wrangled he felt a bit of sympathy; if this was alive, it was trying *hard* to get back to Donald. He could respect that, even if there was no way in *hell* he would let that happen.

Donald, though, clearly thought differently, because now he *was* reaching out, tentatively, to wrap himself around Panchito, who was wrapped around the fire, adding cold relief and pressure to his grip.

Panchito was rarely bothered by the heat, but this wasn't the life-giving warmth of the sun, it was an angry, almost physical heat that reminded him of…

Lava. That's what it was, this felt like the lava lizards!

Why was Donald being attacked by a lava lizard?

Well, no, it wasn't *quite* like that. But close!

None of that really helped him get it under control, and now he wondered what he needed to *do* with it. If he let it go it would probably try to get to Donald again, or maybe it would turn and go for Panchito instead. Or José, who was now adding himself to the mix. All three of them reaching to contain it.

-please...-

Should they put the fire out? Panchito thought they probably could, now, José and Donald cooling it while he held things still.

Donald's emotions were calmer now, Panchito could tell, and José's were getting there, which meant that the panic and fear he could still feel was the fire. Except fire and spells really didn't feel things, so this was for sure alive, and it was scared.

Could he let it burn itself out, knowing that he was holding a living being? It wouldn't be the first time, necessarily, but it would be the first time it wasn't in the heat of a battle, when it was life or death.

Magic, to Panchito, was always instinctive. How he used it, what he did with it. The sun didn't come with instructions, but it did come with opinions, and if he ignored those opinions he would find himself burning out. Literally.

His instincts said here that it wasn't fire, wasn't heat, but life, that this lava octopus thing needed. So he followed that impulse, taking the fire and not tamping it down, but gathering it together, into a smaller and smaller ball, a concentration of potential sparks instead of the raging flailing thing that was so, so scared.

Scared and hurt, the thing moved like each movement was a raw open wound as he pulled it together. Like it was lacking protection in a large, terrifying world, and it wanted to be safe somewhere, anywhere, and didn't know how to reach out without burning. It felt exposed. It felt confused.

It felt *young*.

Donald and José added pressure from the outside, laying arms and hands over his without asking why, and the temperature grew and grew and *grew*-

Panchito knew when to stop. It felt ready, like when his mamá was cooking and swore she could tell without a timer that dinner was finished, even if she left the room. He let his grip lessen, and the little thing didn't squirm this time, didn't spill back into the many-limbed thing it had been. It felt settled, no longer scared but comforted, like the feeling of being wrapped in a thick blanket in a storm. The shape of it, not that he could see, not that any of this was really physically there, felt less open, more solid, no longer the sliding liquid lava. Like he'd surrounded it in a thick, protective shell.

He reached for it again, not to restrain but just to communicate, and felt a gentle, sleepy tap back. It was so small.

Donald reached with him, pressed against it with curiosity, and when it tapped back again he withdrew, a complex series of emotions running through him.

He felt grateful, when his emotions were clear again. Grateful, and exhausted, and resigned, like there was something else waiting just around the corner.

But that was normal for Donald.

Panchito could feel him withdraw, and wished again they could pass more than emotions and magic through the amulets. Sometimes that was enough, and they could talk as well as if they were right next to each other.

This was not one of those times. They would need actual words, because Panchito was very confused about what had happened.

But he couldn't accomplish anything else here, so he forced his eyes back open, into the darkness of his bedroom.

Well, it should have been darkness. But it was instead lit with a warm orange glow. A glow that seemed to be coming from his hands.

José came to the same time he did, sitting up to lean against his shoulder with an exhausted huff of breath, before it stuttered in surprise.

"Panchito, caro," he said slowly, staring at the smooth glowing orb in Panchito's hands. "Is that an egg?"

It was. There was really nothing else it *could* be. The shell looked like cracked, molten lava, but it was smooth and only pleasantly warm under his hands. The faint feeling of the lava magic emanated from inside, but it was tempered now with other things.

Like the life of the sun. The first breath of air. The water that flowed over the planet in a flowing blanket.

Fire. Air. Water. Sun, Wind and Ocean. It felt like them, and it felt like the tiny, scared thing he had held in his arms, sleeping in a protective shell of all the magic they could muster.

A literal magic shell.

Dios, Donald was going to have a heart attack.

“Ah,” he replied, because he didn’t know what else to do, “how do you feel about being a parent?”

Interlude: Lena - Rinse and Repeat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lena was used to all kinds of messages from Webby, from the moment she got a phone. Late-night conspiracy theories, middle of the day jokes and constant invitations to some new project she was working on. Lena cherished every single one, even when they woke her up. It was a reminder that Webby loved her. That no matter their growing list of friends and family, they still had each other.

It seemed silly, needing that after being rescued from the shadow realm by the power of friendship and all, but she couldn't help but smile every time.

Even with this newest text, in the middle of the night. Sure, she groaned, dragging herself to where her phone was charging, but she still smiled, because it was Webby's personalized tone. Violet had one too, but if she wanted to bug Lena, she could just come to her room.

Having her own family, a sister and two dads, had been new, and exciting. And terrifying. She was settled in now, mostly. But those first few nights? She'd spent every waking moment trying to figure out why they had taken her in, why they had adopted her and called her daughter, gave her a room and bought her a phone and clothes. She needed to keep doing whatever it was, so she needed to know!

Apparently it was caring for Violet. And being herself. Because she had asked, finally too scared to mess up that she had admitted she didn't know what she was doing.

Ty had just ruffled her hair, and said she needed a home, and they already loved her, so how could they not?

Indy had added that it was easy to love her. That she was lovable, and they'd had to fight Mrs. B for the right. He'd added that Donald 'Just call me Uncle, everyone does' Duck, the boys' funny talking uncle that Lena had barely spoken to *ever* had apparently told them he had a college fund for her already, and he'd helped get her paperwork in order, which she had taken to mean forging the paperwork, because it wasn't like she had a birth certificate to find.

She'd thanked him for the fund, too baffled and overwhelmed to ask any details. Why did he do it? *When* did he do it? Seriously, how had he gotten her the right documents to prove an existence that wasn't real? She would be asking him those questions. One day.

She lit up her screen, wincing at the brightness in the dark room. Her room. Had she mentioned she had a real room now? An actual room that was *hers,* not a cellar under an abandoned theater by the beach?

Webby: can you meet us at the manor asap?

Webby: that means as soon as you can

Webby: there was an accident

Webby: and uncle donald says we need magic to fix it

Lena: on my way

But on her way to what?

‘Sneaking out to the Manor’ turned into ‘got a ride from her dad, who had caught her sneaking out and insisted she wasn’t walking in the middle of the night, and no, using magic to fly didn’t count.’

“You can’t always control it, for starters, and it’s very late to be going anywhere, even the McDuck’s,” Indy explained to her, not mad, as they drove. She huffed, arms crossed, but she was grateful. Her magic was still a mess, that was true, it had been hard to use since her return from the shadow realm, and truth be told, she was nervous. What if she couldn’t help?

Webby hadn’t replied to any of her other questions, but the phone signal was iffy at best in their plane. Lena honestly didn’t know how it worked in the air in general.

Violet, in the backseat, was wide awake, flipping through her copious notes for any kind of spells that could be helpful with the vague criteria of an ‘accident.’ Had he broken his leg or something, and needed a healing spell because healthcare was expensive? Had he been turned into a frog, and they didn’t know if the cure was true love’s kiss or something?

They reached the gate, which opened without anyone saying anything; Mrs. B met them on the lawn, expression grim.

“Lena, Violet,” she nodded, then glanced at Indo. “Mr. Sabrewing, may I speak to you for a moment?”

“Hold up,” Lena protested immediately, “if you know why Webby called me here in the middle of the night, we all need to hear it. I’m supposed to be the magic cure, kinda need the details.”

Mrs. B eyed her quietly, then Vi, then finally Indy, who looked back at Lena before nodding.

"I think we all need to be in the loop," He agreed.

Mrs. B sighed.

"I don't have all the details myself," she admitted, like it was some fault of hers that she didn't know everything. "Mr. McDuck reached me and said that Donald was struck by some kind of fire spell, which was… intended to be a security measure for the gem they were looking for. A lethal measure," she added reluctantly, and Lena took a sharp breath.

Bringing someone back from the *dead* was a bit beyond her abilities!

"He's still alive, as of a half hour ago. However, the fire has yet to be put out, and Donald himself is insisting that as it is a magic fire, only magic will put it out. He's also insisted on coming back here, instead of any of Mr. McDuck's other suggestions. We're hoping that means he has some idea how to resolve it, but he's been all but unresponsive for the duration of the flight, so we are currently operating in the dark," she continued.

Okay. Not dead, just on fire. A magical fire. That he thought needed magic to be put out.

"Just confirming here, he's tried stop, drop and roll?" Lena suggested sarcastically, because he was a nice guy from what she'd seen, but he got into some weird situations. Who got locked in a pantry for *hours?*

“I would assume that was suggested at some point,” Mrs. B replied shortly. “Apparently water has only had a minimal effect, and it is temporary. We will know more when they arrive.” So saying, she glanced in the sky, clearly scanning for the lights of the plane. Lena looked up too, but saw nothing but a sky full of stars.

“Perhaps a freezing spell then, or a water one? I have a few of each bookmarked,” Violet suggested. Lena went to her immediately, peering at the instructions.

The issue with studying spells, Lena had lamented more than once, was that there seemed to be no rhyme or reason for how each one worked. Some were spoken, some needed ingredients or things to be written down, drawn, carved. Some even needed blood! And try as she might, no matter that she had been sorta raised by a witch and was *literally* made of magic, she couldn’t understand it!

Violet could figure out the individual spells, break each one into small pieces and understood each one, how each piece moved in the whole, but even she didn’t know quite why they remained so inconsistent with each other.

Nevertheless, she had a few spells to practice until the Cloud Slayer, or Sun Chaser, whatever, arrived, so she focused on that.

Naturally, she couldn’t do a single one. Her focus was shot, all she could think about was Webby, and the triplets, and the guy she barely knew that had bought her ice cream and apparently cared enough for her to basically give her a *life*.

It was a relief, and a terrifying moment, when the plane landed in the yard.

The door thing opened with Della all but leaping out, darting past them all into the house with a shout that was… probably in english. Launchpad appeared next, beelining for Mrs. B, glancing at Lena and Violet with a shockingly serious expression.

"Hey, Mrs. B, we're, uh, gonna need a stretcher. Double D was having some trouble moving earlier, figure it would be easier on him if we carry him inside," he explained quietly, a far cry from his usual energy.

Mrs. B nodded, glancing at the plane grimly before she went back into the Manor. Launchpad hesitated, then went back to the plane, reappearing carrying Louie and Huey in his arms. Both were awake, sort of, and protesting, but exhausted, rubbing their eyes.

"LP, let me down, seriously, it's fine, don't leave him alone, I wanna stay with him," Louie insisted, squirming. Lena hadn't seen him so clearly not put-together in, well. Ever? He got scared often, sure, but that wasn't this same drained panic. Like he'd been scared for so long that he was almost bored of it, and yet still terrified. His eyelids drooped, but she could still see the whites were bloodshot.

"I can stay up, I've got the timer, Launchpad, come on-" Huey was also protesting, twisting to stare at the plane. Where Webby was emerging. Unlike everyone else, she was wide awake, almost manic, and her eyes lit on Lena with feverish intensity.

"Lena! Oh thank goodness, I'm sorry I didn't respond, but we hit turbulence and Mr. McDuck insisted we strap in, do you know any spells to put out a fire, I think we might need a special one but maybe a simple one would at least help?" She babbled, hitting Lena at a run. Lena caught her, but she tumbled quickly after, landing on her tail feathers with a painful crunch.

“Ow! Yeah, course I came, and Vi has some spells, but none of them were working…” She started, but trailed off. Webby’s face was clearly wet with tears.

“Yes, I have some options. Perhaps we can try to put out the flames now, before your grandmother returns with a stretcher?” Violet suggested, clutching her notebook to her chest. Webby nodded, and Huey and Louie worked harder to free themselves from Launchpad’s grip.

“LP, *please-”*

Uncle Scrooge appeared, leading Dewey, who looked wrecked, face and feathers a mess. He walked freely over to them, until he was close enough to Launchpad that he just dropped to the ground, leaning against the man’s leg. He looked up at her briefly, then his head dropped back down.

Lena was *terrified.* They all seemed to expect her to work some miracle, but they were all so tired and obviously worried, and *what if she couldn’t do it?*

She stepped backwards, just one small step, while Webby turned to Violet to discuss spells and the boys tuned into that, latching onto the conversation with fervor and desperation, and Lena seriously couldn’t do this. Uncle Scrooge was looking at the spells too, and saying something about a few books in the library, calling for their ghost butler. Lena took another step backwards.

Webby had called her for help. These were her friends, her *family,* and she couldn’t do this. What if she tried to cast this spell and nothing happened? Or made things worse somehow?

Her eyes darted away from the group back to the plane. They had left him alone. It was the only thought that could push through the panic in her head. All this worry, and they left him alone on the plane.

The doorway seemed to be lit by an eerie red glow. Like it already knew she would fail, and the fire was growing in response.

Or it was because Uncle Donald was apparently walking out of the plane, no matter what Launchpad had said, and was staggering, slowly, onto the yard. Lena glanced at the others, still frantically going over options and debating what books to try, and stepped away again.

Webby said, and Mrs. B had said, that the fire needed to be magically put out. That Uncle Donald was insisting on it, actually, refused whatever other options Uncle Scrooge had drudged up. So if he needed her, had some idea what to do, he could just tell her, right?

Away from the others would be easier, probably. The fact that that would *also* mean nobody saw if she failed was only a small bonus.

She took another step, and another, and in the meantime Uncle Donald was moving *fast,* for someone who was literally on fire (she could see the flickering flames on him and yeah, that looked *awful)* , heading towards…

Towards.

Huh. Apparently they were all idiots. He was heading to the beach.

Mrs. B had said water was helping a bit. Apparently the solution was a *lot* of water.

But why would he say he needed magic…?

Lena glanced back again, but apparently nobody had noticed Uncle Donald's departure from the plane, and were still talking by the doors. But he was already reaching the edge of the yard, where the hill started to go down, and if she stopped to explain things, he might disappear, or maybe he was going somewhere else, and she was the one he apparently needed, so…

So. She could explain later.

Lena darted across the lawn, wet from the dew, and followed the awful, menacing red glow.

She hadn't done this little hike, hadn't had a reason to visit the beach yet, so she had to guess a bit where the path was when he got ahead of her. There were some lights here and there, though, and ward stones, those were clearly Webby's handiwork, that glowed faintly with magic.

Or glow in the dark paint? Lena couldn't trust her magic senses most of the time, so she wasn't entirely certain.

Like, was the red glow coming through the woods the fire itself, or the magic of the spell? Fire glowing red would make sense, fire magic also being red would make sense! Magica's purple magic for shadows… kinda made sense? It was a dark color anyway.

She hurried through the trees, because Uncle Donald was moving faster now, she was worried she might lose him-

She reached an opening to the beach. Below her, lit bright against the dark ground, was Uncle Donald, flat out *running* down the pier to the water. Before she could take another step, he hit the water with an almighty *voom* of water and steam. Despite the water, though, the light grew *brighter,* and she swore she could feel the heat from where she was, stumbling in the dark.

Her foot caught on a root, her hands smacked into the rough bark of a tree, and she had to look down, to find her footing and make sure she didn't take a tumble. When she looked back up, on surer footing, the water was lit from below like the middle of the day.

Lena felt like she was seeing spots, for a minute. Green, blue and red swirling shades burst out of the water, surrounding the dark spot that had to be Uncle Donald, and she couldn't make any sense out of any of it. They *had* to see that from the house, right? There was no way nobody saw those lights.

She moved closer, stumbling down the rocks until she hit the beach; she couldn't see him anymore, just the cut-off glow shining over the dock. She ran faster. What was *happening?*

Lena hit the end of the dock with a gasp, scrambling backwards to avoid going over the edge, peering out at the dark water. The same three colors were still swirling around, the red surrounded by blue and green; was he using some kind of water magic to put out the fire?

But *ocean* magic wasn't possible. Even *Lena* knew that. Magic had to be drawn from the environment, and the ocean would drown anyone that tried. It was untamable, that was the first thing anyone doing magic learned. So that had to be something else. Maybe he was using

the water to cool off the fire until he could cast the spell he was doing?

Since when could Uncle Donald do magic anyway?

But it was a relief when the colors faded away, red then green then blue, before everything went dark. Except then she couldn't *see,* she was seeing spots and the water was so, so dark. The moon could barely light the dock. Where was he, did he need help getting out of the water? How deep was the water here anyway?

She leaned further out, squinting fruitlessly into the darkness, and got a splash of water in her face for her trouble.

Lena coughed, spluttering, and backed up while Uncle Donald appeared, dragging himself out of the water (and how did he even do that? The water wasn't that high! … was it?), rolling onto the dock and shaking off the water and salt. His shirt was shredded, basically just a drenched set of cuffs and that funny collar clinging to his feathers.

She looked at his back, kinda scared to see what it looked like, but all that was there was bare skin, feathers gone. No burns.

He'd been covered with a fire for *hours,* how were there no burns? Was it just too hard to see them? The moon wasn't *that* dim, was it?

"Lena?" He sounded *wrecked,* like he'd been choking on smoke, or drowning, for hours. "What are you doing here?"

"Heh, uh, Webby called me," Lena said, shaking off the excess water

on her face. “Said there was some curse or something, and I’m kinda the only magic person we all know. Or, thought we knew, I guess,” she added, eyeing him. He snorted, shaking his head and pulling himself up. His knees were still trembling.

“That’s a long story,” he said tiredly. He held out his hand, gesturing with his other back up the hill. “Let me get a new shirt and we can go tell it to the others.”

He staggered towards the houseboat that she had completely missed, tied to the dock. She hesitated, then slid under his arm, worried that he wasn’t going to make it. He sighed, relieved? Annoyed? But either way, he leaned against her.

He smelled like salt and ashes; Lena sneezed.

There was nobody on the dock. There was nobody on the hill. There was nothing around them besides the sound of the waves. It creeped Lena out, a bit. She didn’t think she’d ever been around Uncle Donald alone this long.

Not that he was creepy or anything! Right now he was kinda mysterious, and she was still recovering from thinking she might get him killed because she couldn’t use her own magic, but he was nice! Friendly! Had, without even being *asked,* made sure she had all the stupid grown-up stuff a teenager would need.

And had nearly *died* tonight, where was everyone else?! That light show should have caught everyone’s attention! Plus, in hindsight, it was weird that nobody had thought of the *huge* body of water they lived next to.

Besides Uncle Donald, anyway. Apparently he’d had a plan the whole

time.

They limped to the boat, up the gangplank, and into the house. Lena didn't think she'd been inside before, she hadn't had a reason to, so she took the opportunity to look around when Uncle Donald peeled away to go down a hallway.

It was small, but it had that comfy, homey feeling that the Sabrewing's house had, that Webby's room did. There were photos all over the walls of the triplets, of Uncle Donald, Gladstone and Della, his partners that she recognized from that video. A bunch of people she didn't know. They looked so cheerful.

Webby had a photo of them together on her family wall. Ty and Indy had insisted on taking a photo of her and Violet for their walls as soon as they adopted her. She'd been happy to have *two* photos of her somewhere. Proof she existed, was more than just a shadow. Proof that somebody cared enough to put her photo on their walls.

The boys had so many, just in this one room.

Except there was one, there in the middle, that caught her eye. They were *all* in it. Her included. She had no idea when this was taken; some sleepover? Even Boyd was there, in the back. Her head was thrown back in a laugh, Webby gesturing wildly with a fork of pancake in front of her, Louie dodging away with an exaggerated grimace.

Uncle Donald came back into the room, a loose flannel shirt thrown on, rubbing his face. He was walking steadier now, which was funny because Lena had some trouble doing the same, as the waves rocked the boat.

“Time to face the music,” he sighed, gesturing to the door. Lena nodded, following him out.

“So… you gonna explain what all that was about?” She asked, as they reached the deck of the boat.

“Yes,” a cold voice replied. Lena felt a shiver roll down her spine. She whirled around, staring at the dock.

“I think we all would love to know what that was,” Magica de Spell continued, leaning against the dock post. “After all, I’m sure McDuck would be *delighted* by a family member using *magic.”*

Lena stumbled backwards into the closed door. Uncle Donald stepped in front of her, one hand subtly blocking her chest, and she appreciated it, but the dude had nearly died today, was he really going to go toe to toe with Magica?!

"Magica," he said, and wow, he didn't even sound *worried.* Annoyed, maybe. "What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing," she said smugly, gesturing elegantly with one hand. "But I was so *curious* about that light show going on, you really should shield better if you don't want your uncle knowing about your hidden talents."

It was the middle of the night, Lena told herself. She wasn't as powerful right now. That was the *worst* time for shadow magic,

everyone knew that. There *were* no shadows at night, shadows required a light source, and being in the shadow of the whole earth didn't really count. Magic was funny like that.

Uncle Donald raised one eyebrow, glancing up at the hill for a moment. Was backup coming? Maybe he could see someone.

"What makes you think he doesn't already know?"

Oh. Oh *wow.*

Lena looked at his face. She knew he was lying. He'd *clearly* done some kind of magic earlier, the fire had been *red,* which meant that the blue or green had to be *his. He* knew he was lying, cause if Uncle Scrooge had known that he could fix it himself he would have said so, instead of calling Lena in.

There wasn't a *twitch* in his eyes of a lie. He was as relaxed as can be, like they were talking about the weather.

Guess she knew where Louie had actually gotten it from.

Magica's face spasmed, eyes darting across Uncle Donald's face for any hint of uncertainty. He looked back. Calm. Almost bored. Lena honestly thought he was about to fall asleep on his feet.

Magica huffed. She glanced at Lena, who stared back, as blandly as she could. Thankfully, Magica clearly didn't know Lena's face very well, turning back to Uncle Donald with a scowl.

“Well. Maybe I’ll be finding that out for myself,” she said airily, standing upright. Lena stifled a snort; she was trying to save face, but it was obvious she didn’t think she could actually tell Uncle Scrooge anything.

Why would she even think he would believe her, actually? It wasn’t like Uncle Scrooge would trust her; he would probably attack on sight, it didn’t really matter what she said.

“Before you go,” Uncle Donald called out, as she turned to take a step away. “Why did you care at all?”

“Oh, idle curiosity,” she replied, half turned to look at them. “One does wonder why McDuck’s nephew is casting spells, when he’s so against the practice.”

“So you weren’t hoping for something?” He asked. “Something you can’t do yourself?”

She let out an affronted gasp, turning fully. Nailed it, Lena thought, but she was completely lost. What would *Magica* want?

“What would I need *you-”* she began, but he cut her off.

“Had to be pretty important for you to come to ask directly,” he said bluntly. “And somehow I doubt you were going to ask me to attack Scrooge. So, one chance - what do you want?”

Lena peered up at him, frowning. He glanced down at her.

“Why do we care?” She asked under her breath, squinting at Magica, who was struggling to answer.

“Better find out now, not later,” he replied quietly.

Sure, probably, but why did he think he’d get an honest answer out of her?

Magica huffed, turned fully back and walked to the post she’d been leaning against. Paused, tapped her foot, scowled. Finally she sighed, and crossed her arms.

“I have been trying to locate someone,” she said, “but their magic is far too similar to mine, and I can’t- I have been unsuccessful.”

Lena blinked.

“And you’re hoping we’ll *help* you? What, did you get tired of getting your butt kicked and need some new enemy to beat up?” She demanded, stepping out of Uncle Donald’s shadow to eye her ex-aunt properly.

Magica glared, one hand rising up a bit, like she intended to start a spell, before she paused, clenching the hand into a fist and letting it sink back down. She was gritting her teeth. Lena reached for her magic, trying to gather a ball of fire in her palm, but as usual, it was hard to gather, and she could only feel a faint flicker before it went away.

“I hardly need *assistance* finding my *enemies,* ” she snarled. Lena scowled right back.

“So you need help finding an ally?” Uncle Donald interrupted. Magica twisted slightly to look at him, scowl still in place.

“... my brother,” she finally said. Lena felt a shock roll down her spine. “I’m trying to locate my brother. He’s missing, and I have been unable to locate him myself.”

“You have a *brother?”* Lena demanded, staring. It was the first *she’d* ever heard of it! Magica didn’t spare her a glance.

Uncle Donald looked thoughtful.

Oh.

Oh *no* . Lena realized what was happening before he opened his beak. He was going to try to help.

“Well, I don’t think blackmail will work,” he said slowly, “But how about a deal?”

Magica squinted at him.

“What kind of deal?”

“I help you find your brother. You leave the kids out of your fights with Scrooge.”

What?

“What?” Magica asked, echoing Lena’s thoughts. All the things he could ask for, and that’s what he came up with?

Well, actually, that did make complete sense.

“You leave the kids out of your fights with Scrooge. Period. And I help you find your brother,” he repeated, crossing his arms. He still looked tired and bored.

Lena felt sick. This was a terrible idea. Who knew if Magica even *had* a brother? This could be a trap! And even if she *did,* he was probably just as bad as she was!

She reached out to tug on his sleeve, feeling like a little kid the whole time, and hissed under her breath. He glanced down at her, and smiled. Just a soft smile, one that would be comforting under other circumstances.

“This is a *terrible* idea,” she insisted, but Magica interrupted before she could continue.

“Which children? Your… nephews, I assume,” she asked, almost pleasantly. If you ignored the snarl on her face. Uncle Donald scowled at her.

“And Webby, Lena, Violet, and Boyd, for starters,” he told her. She narrowed her eyes at him, then at Lena, who glared back. One of her hands was still clutching Uncle Donald’s sleeve; for the life of her she couldn’t release it.

“Shall I just assume any child in your vicinity is included?” She snarked, but Uncle Donald nodded, like that was a reasonable question, and yeah, it really was.

“Fine. Deal. Your children to remain neutral in my ongoing war with McDuck, in exchange for finding my brother,” she snapped, and held out her hand. Uncle Donald’s eyes narrowed, but then he huffed a breath and stepped forward to shake her hand.

There was a flicker of light around their wrists when their hands met; Lena blinked, surprised. Was that a spell?

Magica caught her glance, and scoffed, pulling her hand back to delicately rub it on her dress.

“Have you never seen a magic vow?” She demanded; Lena rolled her eyes.

“Who would have showed me? *You?”*

Magica didn’t respond; she stepped back, as though to allow them both off the boat.

“Where shall we set up? The beach?” She asked, gesturing vaguely with one hand. Lena blinked at her.

“Wait, you want to do this *tonight?* Seriously?!”

Uncle Donald had been on *fire* for *hours,* not to mention the family on the hill that was still probably looking for them both by now. They had to be freaking out, and surely someone would think of the beach eventually!

"I do not *intend to wait-"* Magica started to growl, but Uncle Donald cut her off by sighing and starting to walk towards the dock.

"Beach is fine. Let's just- let's just do this," he said in a grumble. He looked so tired, Magica was awful, Lena wanted to go shrieking up the hill to get some help, but-

But. If she left, he would be alone. With Magica. And he'd only included his kids in the deal, not himself. Magica didn't have to leave *him* alone, if he didn't actually find this guy, then-!

So. She followed them both to the beach, glaring at Magica all the way. Magica walked ahead of them, strutting like she thought she was some kind of queen. She lit a few witch lights when her feet hit the beach, hovering them around in a wide circle glowing a faint purple. Uncle Donald glanced around at them, then shrugged and picked up a stick from the ground.

He started walking in a circle, drawing something in the sand. Lena could tell it was a spell circle, but beyond that she couldn't read it. Violet probably could, given enough time, but all Lena could see were lines in the dirt. It didn't even look like the other spells she'd seen before!

Magica peered at it closely, but of course she didn't say anything useful.

"Do you have anything of his?" Uncle Donald asked, without looking

up from his work. Magica startled, looking up.

"I- yes, of course I do. Is this spell even going to work? It doesn't look like anything *I've* ever studied," she replied, beak up in the air. Uncle Donald rolled his eyes. Lena followed suit.

"You're welcome to find someone else," he replied. Lena stifled a giggle. Magica looked affronted, but she didn't speak again.

Finally, he seemed satisfied by what he'd written, and stepped into the circle. Magica stepped in next, settling to the ground without even looking up to confirm that she was supposed to be doing that. Granted, Uncle Donald seemed fine with it, he didn't say anything, but still. Lena couldn't help but scowl, arms crossed.

There was enough room in the circle for her to sit as well. Funny that it was large enough for three people, unless that was just how big it needed to be for this. Magica didn't look up, rummaging in her cloak for something.

She didn't want to do this. Fuck, she didn't want to.

She would have to sit next to her. Hell, if what she'd seen of spell circles was true, she would probably have to hold her hand or something. The thought made her skin crawl, felt like the shadows and sludge were crawling up her throat again.

But she forced her feet over the circle anyway. She was curious, morbidly so, and she trusted Uncle Donald. Which was a funny feeling. Trusting an adult.

And she didn't want to leave him alone.

She dropped to her butt on the ground and settled cross legged. That was how it was supposed to go, right? The other two were, anyway.

"Lena?" Uncle Donald asked, peering at her with concern.

"I'm helping," she said. No argument in her voice. She hoped.

His eyes darted over her face.

He didn't ask if she was sure. Lena appreciated that, but at the same time she kinda wished he had asked. Given her an out from her decision that she didn't know if she wanted to follow through with.

Finally, he nodded.

"Place your brother's item in the center," Uncle Donald said. Magica did so, setting down a bundle of black. A cloak, maybe?

"What's his name?"

"Poe," she answered quietly. "His name is Poe."

Poe and Magica? Guess their parents weren't into the matchy-matchy names, Lena thought with a grin, but stifled her laughter. Didn't seem like the time.

She did glance up at the hill, trying to see if they were going to be interrupted, but there was no sign of movement on the path. Had nobody realized where they had gone yet?

… how worried was everyone? Lena had hoped they would return quickly, just a pop down to the water and 'surprise! Everything is okay now!' Nobody would have time to panic. The longer they were here, the less and less that was going to be an option.

They took each other's hands. Magica's was clammy, grip too tight. Uncle Donald's was cool to the touch, even though he'd left the water a while ago.

Lena had kinda expected a spoken part of the spell. Magica usually had a whole ritual, the few times she'd seen things more complicated than a shadow blast. Dramatic gestures, glowing eyes, the whole shebang. So she was surprised when the circle lit up from the outside, and felt a shock of *cold* running through her like she'd been dunked in ice water. Her hands clenched.

"You may want to close your eyes, Lena," Uncle Donald murmured, his own eyes already closed. "This can get a bit nauseating if you don't."

Lena hesitated, glancing at Magica (who was resolutely looking straight forward at neither of them), then followed his advice.

Once her eyes closed though, everything got *brighter.* She could see a deep blue glow surrounding them, flowing through them, twisted with purple and a bright blue she didn't recognize. The three colors twisted and wove around, but the colors were sharp against each other, not blending. The swirls were amazing to watch; she almost wished she

could just sit and admire.

But the lights changed, shifted and moved so they weren't just on the ground around them, but forming a cage, or a dome, closing at the top. When it did, she felt herself rising in the air. Frantic, she opened her eyes, but they were still on the beach, sand rubbing against her ankles.

She closed her eyes again. In their ball of light, the three of them rose to the air, up and up and up, until below them she could see thousands of pinpricks of light, all manner of colors. There were a few spots of the bright blue near where she thought they had risen from. The darker blue color seemed to stretch faintly into the horizon.

A trail of purple followed them up, and there were little ones twined across the ground. A bigger blotch of it was around what Lena thought might be the Money Bin, though it was nearly drowned out by the hundreds of smaller lights there.

Uncle Donald didn't move, she could feel his hand in hers, but it *felt* like he gestured. The thing in front of them rose in the air. It started to glow too, a dark purple color. It looked identical to the other purples around them, for a minute, but eventually Lena started to see tiny differences. Just the barest shade off, it was maybe a bit more blue? Or darker?

Another gesture that wasn't an actual movement, and the colors around them dimmed, seemingly muted, until only the purple ones remained. These, too, faded until they were nearly invisible, leaving them in darkness.

"Where did you last see him?" Uncle Donald asked, but didn't really ask. His voice was crystal clear, but Lena was certain he hadn't actually *said* anything.

“Europe. Eastern France,” Magica replied, and *she* didn’t really speak either. They rose higher, and then she felt like they were *flying,* swiftly crossing vast amounts of land that she couldn’t see. She clenched one hand tighter, and Uncle Donald squeezed back.

There were occasional flashes of purple as they went, but none were quite right, and they were only faint traces. Lena wished she could close her inner eyes too, it was a bit dizzying, but opening her eyes to escape it had resulted in a nauseating vertigo, so she closed them again.

The purple traces were much fainter, when they slowed down, but there were more of them. A cloud of wispy indigo haze over the land. Magica and Poe must have been here for a long time, if there were still signs of them from so long ago. Lena looked around as they slowed down.

If this Poe was here, wouldn’t there be a stronger presence? The other lights had been much more, well, bright. There was only the faintest fog of color here.

“Magica,” Uncle Donald said/not said. He didn’t elaborate, but Lena could feel his irritation.

“He *was* turned into a raven during our first fight with McDuck, a great many years ago. Did I not mention that?” Magica’s response was flippant. Uncle Donald groaned. Lena concurred; how did *that* happen? It wasn’t like Uncle Scrooge had magic.

The traces flickered, like someone was adjusting the settings on their spells or something. The indigo fog faded, the darkness setting in until there was nothing except them and the faint color of the cloak

between them.

Magica growled. Uncle Donald said nothing. They all peered into the nothing around them, an empty wasteland. Lena squinted into it, trying to see something, anything at all.

Nothing. Nothing.

Until…

“There!” She said, and could *feel* that her beak didn’t move. Weird.

Off in the distance, in the absolute dark, there was the faintest purple glow. She tugged on their group now, dragging them towards it. As they got closer, she could hear something, but it wasn't the not-real speech of before. It actually sounded like-

“Webby?” Lena asked, really asked, opening her eyes briefly.

Sure, *now* they show up. The circle was being approached by, well, everyone, eyes wide with panic. In the circle, she could feel they were still moving, approaching the light she’d seen.

“Lena?!” Webby shouted, reaching them first. Lena met her eyes, glancing at Uncle Donald and Magica. If they tried to interrupt the spell, who knew what could happen? Interrupting a spell could make the magic backfire, they might lose Poe and not be able to find him again-

She shook her head when Webby reached forward, and Webby stopped.

“Poe?” Magica asked in her head. “Poe?”

Webby peered at her, at the circle, at Uncle Donald. Her eyes hesitated there, then back to Lena. Lena shrugged, nodded. Webby nodded back, and turned to face the others.

Lena had to close her eyes, the difference was too much and she felt sick.

In the dark, they had reached the faint light. It was a… bird? Magica had said he was a raven, right?

“Good job, Lena,” Uncle Donald said.

It seemed like he was looking at them, but it was hard to tell, it wasn’t like she could really see a face. Magica kept calling his name, increasingly desperately. She seemed certain that this was Poe, at least.

“Please, Poe, I need you to wake up!” Magica cried, voice cracking, and the figure twitched, the color getting sharper, maybe? Brighter?

She could hear Webby talking, arguing? But it was hard to focus on both things in both places. Lena had to trust Webby. She tuned in to the dark again, trying to ignore what was happening on the beach.

The maybe-Poe moved towards them, slowly, cautiously, a wild animal approaching a new thing, until it was sitting in the center of their circle, on top of the glowing cloak. It was looking at Magica, except where Lena thought it might be looking at her.

Lena shifted awkwardly, looking away. Magica wasn't her family, she *wasn't,* but she had considered the witch an aunt once. What did that make Poe, to her? Did he have to be anything?

While she was thinking, Uncle Donald gathered them up, pulling Poe into the exact center and tugging them all backwards.

The trip back was faster, blindingly so, like he was in a rush, and Lena felt like she was staggering when she got back to her body, eyes seeing spots, stomach tumbling over itself. She kept her eyes closed for a minute, ears ringing.

When she felt ready to look again, she tentatively opened one eye, then the other. The glowing cage was still around them. She was still holding Uncle Donald and Magica's hands. The cloak in the center of the circle was moving.

Outside the circle, the whole family was laid out. She could see Indy at the back, staring at her with worry. She gave him a tentative smile, watched his shoulders droop. He looked at Magica, who looked as green as Lena felt. Well, greener than usual.

Uncle Scrooge was as close as he could get to the circle, and it looked like the only reason he wasn't trying to step in was because Webby was standing facing him, growling. The boys were on the other side, gathered close, staring at Uncle Donald like he was going to disappear.

He wasn't looking at any of them. He was peering at the cloak in the center, which in the time Lena had been distracted had opened up to reveal a raven. Like, a normal animal raven, with a streak of purple feathers in its crest. It was peering at Magica, head tilted to one side.

Its eyes were dark, Lena seriously doubted it understood what was happening. Unlike them, it didn't look sick in the slightest.

It hopped out of the cloak, towards Magica.

"Poe?" She asked, squinting at it. She was still pale, but she leaned forward eagerly. Their hands were all still together. She tugged at Lena's hand, trying to get loose, and Uncle Donald's hands tightened in warning.

The lines in the sand behind him *changed,* symbols shifting without warning, and the dome of light around them swirled in response. They moved, brighter now at the top, concentrating light on the crow, who shifted in response, feathers ruffling.

"Magica," Uncle Donald said. His voice echoed. "Call your brother."

"Poe? Poe, please wake up. I'm-" She hesitated, just a moment, but she wasn't looking at anyone else, just at the bird. "I'm *sorry,* I didn't mean to hit you, I tried to find you to fix it, please just wake up so we can fix this, *please-"*

She continued, repeating his name and apologies, while the glow above him ebbed and flowed.

"Poe!"

“Poe?” Lena could hear Uncle Scrooge ask, and Louie echoed it. Magica had said the whole bird thing happened during a fight, right? It sounded like it was one of Magica’s own spells that had hit him, maybe it had bounced or something.

Lena wasn’t feeling bad for Magica. She was *not.* Magica didn’t deserve her sympathy.

But it probably sucked to know that someone you cared about was gone because of you.

“Yo, Poe crow guy, you gonna wake up anytime soon?” She called out. The crow turned to stare at her. The lights pulsed.

“Come on, I bet you can’t even eat pancakes like that. Or, I don’t know, watch movies? Cause your eyes aren’t facing completely forward anymore. Read? Come on Magica, what would he miss doing?”

“Lena,” Magica grumbled. But she turned back to the crow. “Fine. You need to wake up. There’s a… oh, a new novel I’m sure you’d like?” She offered.

“And blackberries for breakfast. I’ll get you some every day for the rest of your life, I swear, but you need to *wake up first!”*

“Have you tried an alarm?” Dewey called out, from outside the circle. Lena had completely forgotten about them, if she was being honest.

Magica turned slightly to glare out at him, but Uncle Donald chose that moment to open his mouth.

And let out a *shriek* that 100% sounded like Lena's phone alarm, loud and startling and perfect for dragging you out of the best (or worst) of dreams. She flinched, trying to pull her hands to cover her ears, but she couldn't.

The crow flinched too, squawking and fluttering up. It couldn't leave the circle though, right?

Right?

Nope, it hit the top of the circle and stopped, fluttering. Magica stood, dragging them both with her, scowling.

"Poe, for Nyx's sake, *wake up!"* She shouted, and the crow stared at her, and was it just Lena, or were its eyes lighter now? They'd been nearly black before, but there seemed to be a growing ring of yellow.

Like Magica's eyes. She could just make out the slit pupil.

The crow hovered, and the light grew and grew until it was near blinding, Lena closed her eyes again (this time to blissful darkness), and waited until the growing pressure around them popped like a balloon.

She opened her eyes. Curled up in the center of their circle was an awkwardly huddled green duck, clutching the cloak around himself with shaking hands.

He looked like Magica. Lena leaned back, and his eyes snapped open, looking at her, then Uncle Donald, before he twisted enough to look at Magica. She was staring, eyes wide, bright. She was leaning forward, they were almost beak to beak actually, breathing heavily.

Nobody moved. Lena was holding her breath. All she could do was stare at the man in front of her.

God, why had they done this? He was going to be just like Magica, there were two of them now, and sure, there was some magical light when Magica agreed to leave all of them kids out of things, but that deal *hadn't* included Poe! And it didn't include Uncle Donald, or Della, or Uncle Scrooge!

They'd just saved an enemy. She had *helped,* he was here because she had spotted him in the darkness. Anything he did to hurt them was partially on *her.*

He smiled, finally. It was a nice smile, Lena thought wildly. Shame it belonged to Magica's brother. His hand came up to reach for Magica's face, and finally she let Lena's hand go to reach back out to join him.

He took her hand, then let go and…

Tweaked her beak. She let out a surprised squawk.

"Took you long enough," he rasped, and he sounded *friendly.* Not smug, or mean. Magica would have sounded annoyed in his shoes, Lena knew that, but all she did was let out a huff, reaching out to drag him up. The cloak fell around his shoulders naturally, but his shoulders were clearly trembling, his whole body was actually, and he

leaned on Magica heavily when he reached his feet.

Lena took a step back. Webby was behind her, Lena could feel her helping hold Lena steady, because she was shaking too. She felt too warm, all of a sudden, and let out a gasping breath. Her mouth tasted like salt.

Uncle Donald had taken a step away from the de Spells, and the triplets had taken the opportunity to cling to him, whether to hold him up or just to be close wasn't clear. Lena could finally see Della now, and Mrs. B, just a few steps behind them.

They had them outnumbered, but they were all tired; it was the middle of the night for Lena and Vi, and the rest of the group had just flown across half the world. Uncle Donald had spent that flight on fire, and wow, a lot had happened tonight, hadn't it?

Poe turned slightly, and his eyes caught hers. Unlike Magica, his eyes were warm. Lena shuddered, and felt Violet slide next to her. There was someone behind her, a tall someone, but she didn't know if it was her dad or Uncle Scrooge, and she didn't care.

She met the yellow gaze. It felt... warm. Curious. Magica had never looked at her like that. Even when she was trying to convince Lena to help her, she had always felt disdainful, judgey.

"Lena?" He asked. "Did Magica- are you Lena?"

Magica went still. Lena frowned, and nodded. The guy had been a bird, long before she'd been created, why would he know her name?

“You look like her,” he said, and he was smiling. Magica winced.

“Look like who?” Lena demanded, because *no,* she did *not* look like Magica!

She woke up from nightmares where her feathers turned green, color dripping like acid across her hands and face while she *screamed.* Every morning she woke up and dove for a mirror, making sure her feathers were still white. Like Webby. Like Uncle Scrooge.

Poe frowned, peered at his sister in confusion, and did Magica look… embarrassed?

“You named her after our *mother,* and you didn’t tell her?” He demanded, voice gaining some strength as he spoke.

“I’m *what?”* Lena squawked, flailing backwards, only caught by Uncle Scrooge *and* Indy, who were both apparently behind her.

“I didn’t - come on Poe, we need to get out of here. I’ll explain later,” Magica insisted, tugging at him. He frowned at her, then looked the circle over. His eyes landed on Uncle Scrooge consideringly, before he looked at Uncle Donald.

He tilted his head to the side, just like he had as a crow, before he nodded.

“Thank you for your help,” he said, before his eyes came back to Lena. “Both of you.”

“Yes, yes, very grateful, wonderful, let’s *go,* ” Magica snapped, pulling him down the beach. She wasn’t using magic to flee.

Could she use any? Lena had her amulet. She’d never seen Magica do magic without it. She was a witch, she should be able to gather power without it, but for some reason she hadn’t done that-

A blue bubble formed and they floated away. Lena blinked, thinking she’d been wrong but why was it… blue…

Dark blue.

She looked back at Uncle Donald. Who was just standing there, watching them float away (and was Magica’s face startled? Scared?). He wasn’t glowing or anything, but that was clearly the same color of his magic.

She almost asked why he was *helping them escape,* before she glanced around at the panicked, frozen expressions around them. Yeah, probably for the best that they get them out of there; Uncle Scrooge looked about three seconds from freaking out.

“What in *blazes* was that?!”

Make that none.

Chapter End Notes

Consider the length of this one an apology for.... well, whatever you might think I need to apologize for, I'm pretty shameless

Donald's back (no pun intended)

Donald was so, so very tired. He couldn't deal with this right now. Hell, he was pretty sure if he tried to do much of *anything* he would just drop unconscious. Which was a tempting way out of the situation, but it was bound to scare the kids, and, well…

He'd done enough of that today. Yesterday. Whenever.

He sighed, long and low, and turned to face his uncle.

Scrooge looked like he'd gone through hell. His feathers were ruffled and scraggly, his eyes were red-rimmed and blown wide. The bags under them were basically black, and his hands were shaking even now. Donald bit back his annoyed retort and aimed for something a bit more evenly keeled. (Even though *he* was the one that had nearly died, *he* had to be the calm one- but it didn't matter)

"Can we talk about this tomorrow? I can't- I don't have the energy to go through this right now," he asked, almost begged. Scrooge's face hardened. No sympathy there. There never was, not for Donald.

Buck up, you only nearly died tonight after hours of torture.

"Don't have the- you just helped Magica de Spell do some magic ritual! Can't imagine why you don't have the *energy!"* Scrooge snarled, and Donald let out a breath. The boys were gathered close around him, he could tell Della and Bentina were behind him. The Sabrewings were off to his other side. Nobody spoke up.

Pretty par the course, really. Just Donald, against Scrooge, and

everyone else watching.

"You're right, I did do that. And that was after the last twelve hour flight and the temple," he snapped, a reminder of what had happened earlier; Scrooge flinched. "I'm *tired,* and nobody is in danger right now, so can you please move so I can go to bed?"

"I swear," he added, "I'll explain in the morning."

Scrooge's face went mulish. Stubborn.

"Magica isn't-"

"Do you trust me?" Donad interrupted. Scrooge stopped. Stared at him.

"What?"

"Do. You. Trust. Me." Donald said again, slowly.

"I- of course I do!" Scrooge insisted, and he looked almost distraught that Donald was asking.

Good.

Everyone around them was silent. Louie's hands were tight around his shirt, and he couldn't tell the difference between Dewey and Huey's bodies, they were so close.

“Then *trust me,* ” he pressed, and something changed in Scrooge’s expression. “Please.”

A pause, where he tried to keep his eyes on Scrooge, but his eyelids drooped. He was *tired,* and he hadn’t had a chance to even process what had happened the last several hours. The fire, the gem, the Caballeros. Magica, Lena. Poe. God, he didn’t know if he had done the right thing, and there was the fire that Panchito had gathered *to* him, he didn’t know what had happened there, he had to talk to Lena…

He was so tired.

He almost doesn’t hear Scrooge’s response.

“Hm?”

“I said fine, Donald,” Scrooge repeated, almost gently, frowning at him. “We can talk in the morning.”

Donald slumped, both in relief and because he was really flagging now, and couldn’t keep himself upright.

Clearly Bentina noticed, because the next thing he knew he was being scooped up, kids and all, and being carried down the beach back to the pier. Her steps disturbed most of the spell circle, but that was fine, he’d prefer nobody have a good look at it anyway.

“Where’s LP?” He asked, because that was the one person he hadn’t seen yet.

“When we saw who was with you on the beach, he stayed hidden to call in backup should it become necessary. I assume he will join us shortly,” Bentina replied quietly. Softer than she usually was.

“Unca Donald,” Huey said, but he didn’t continue.

“Thank you all, for your help earlier,” he tells them. Wishing Webby was here with them, but she was with Lena, and that was better.

He hadn’t wanted Lena involved with the spell. It was dangerous, it was iffy if it would even *work,* and that was without considering Magica being there. He was shocked Lena had *volunteered.* Was it curiosity? Or some leftover affection for Magica? He wouldn’t blame the kid, it was hard not to harbor some love for the person that raised you.

He hoped she hadn’t done it for his sake. If they hadn’t been on a time crunch, he would have asked, made sure he had an answer he could trust. As it was, he would have to talk to her later about everything. And see about her getting some magic training, because it was pretty clear she hadn’t gotten any. Why hadn’t Magica given her some lessons? Why wasn’t she learning *now?*

Well. Did her parents know anyone to ask? Or how to find someone? *Magica* would probably have had the resources, but if she wasn’t teaching Lena herself, why would she help find a teacher?

… did she know about the Phantom Blot? The thought drew him short, waking him all the way up for a moment. The magic community was so insular, so interconnected, that he’d been completely satisfied that Morgana had gotten the word out to any magic users potentially in danger. But once again, Lena’s only

connection was *Magica.*

He would have to fix that.

He'd have to tell the family something about his magic training. It wasn't a conversation he *wanted* to have, not now (not ever), but he needed to say something.

Had it just been him and Magica on the beach, it might be a different story. But he wouldn't ask Lena to lie for him.

It would make the *other* things he needed to explain easier, at least. Or distract from them by sheer volume.

They reached the deck of the boat, and here Bentina hesitated before setting him down; the doorway wasn't wide enough for her to carry him through with the boys. Donald wobbled, but managed to keep his feet under him.

Donald wanted his hammock. But his room was small.

And he wanted his family close by. It had been a hard day.

"Boys," he said, "can you grab the sleeping bags, and my other hammock? I think we can sleep outside tonight."

"Yes Unca Donald!" Huey replied, dropping down to the floor and darting inside. Dewey was a half-step behind him, but he hesitated at the door.

“Dewey,” Donald said, and his boy turned to look at him directly. God, he could still feel the terror squeezing his heart, the realization that he couldn’t see Dewey, the heat of the blast and the grit under his feet as he willed them to go *faster*.

The impact. The burning. And two tiny hands clutching his own.

“I’m so happy you’re okay,” he said. Dewey’s eyes went wide, then watery, and he darted back to hug him so tight he almost couldn’t breathe. Louie, still holding his shoulders, sniffled.

“Told you so,” Louie muttered.

“But it was my- my- my *fault!”* Dewey wailed. Donald shook his head.

“No, honey, it wasn’t. Nothing that happened tonight was your fault,” Donald said to him, repeating it when Dewey continued to cry, until his sobs faded to hiccuping breaths. Louie dropped down to grab Dewey from the other side.

“I will go assist Huey with gathering blankets,” Bentina said carefully, and she disappeared into the houseboat. Leaving Donald with two crying kids. And honestly, he fully expected to have Webby and Huey in the same position later; Huey was channeling his anxiety into being helpful, and Webby at least had a distraction in Lena and Violet, but that wouldn’t last forever.

The rest of the group was walking onto the decks, Launchpad pulling up the rear, phone to his ear. Dewey wasn’t full-out sobbing now, just sniffling, so Donald could look up at them all.

“Thinking about a sleepover on the deck, what do you all think?”

It wouldn’t have been an option, before. He was too paranoid about being out there without lifejackets, exposed to any bad weather or gawkers at the pier. But the boat was in fairly shallow water, they were on a private beach, and he was an ocean mage, for crying out loud, there wasn’t much of a chance of an issue while he was there. Even dead asleep.

“That sounds great!” Webby exclaimed, too enthusiastic, eyes manic, and she led the other girls inside to either help or continue being a distraction. Yeah, she was going to break down at some point, and so was he, honestly.

His back still burned with remembered heat. He could feel Dewey’s tiny beating heart against his chest, and half a day ago, he’d been in this same position, in a dusty temple with the power of a volcano latching onto him in a desperate bid to *escape.*

It had been *heat* and *fire* and *burning* , but it had also felt like a thousand tiny needle-claws grabbing onto his very soul, desperately pulling and tearing at anything they could reach, trying to get out out *out* the only way they could.

By going *through* .

It had taken everything Donald had, every inch of his concentration to keep it from succeeding. Holding off the burning, scrabbling thing that seemed to have new limbs and new reach with every breath. Had he been better prepared, maybe he could have pulled it off, blocked it or redirected it somewhere else. Had he been closer to the ocean at the start, he probably could have handled it.

If he was Panchito, he probably could have let it through him in the first place. Open the gates and let it go through and out, free at last from its prison. Their elements were so much closer. Fire and fire could coexist; fire and water not so much. Donald had been able to feel himself burning, boiling away. Struggling to hold onto himself in the wake of *heat* . As it was, being so far from the water, and in no shape to try to fix things alone by the time they were close enough to it to be useful, he'd had to hold it off by the skin of his teeth and the edges of his fingernails until he could scream for help.

Thank every god he knew, and any others involved, that Panchito and José had been there. He didn't know what he would have done without them. He hadn't even had to explain what was happening.

That being said, they were going to kill him if he didn't let them know he was fine. He sent what emotions he could through the amulet, but he should call…

His eyes had closed at some point, and he was on his knees holding Dewey and Louie now. He tried to look up, he could hear others around him, but he honestly couldn't get the energy up to drag his eyelids up.

"Come on lads, let's let your uncle sleep," Scrooge said, apparently from the bottom of a well. Or Donald was in the well? His eyes were so heavy.

Dewey was in his arms. Or was it Louie now? Webby? Someone had their arms around him, hugging? Lifting?

He needed to reassure his family he was fine. He needed to *open his eyes.*

He needed to… needed…

Donald woke in his hammock, visions of fire and darkness dancing across his eyelids. He blinked at the pink sky, wishing for a long minute that he was capable of sleeping in. No matter what, he was awake at dawn. There were times he'd lay there, eyes stubbornly closed, waiting until his body at least got rest, but his mind?

Suns up, Donald's up.

He'd been laid on his side, a blanket tossed over him. Probably Bentina, but who knew. He'd checked the night before, there was no damage left besides the missing feathers, but he still was happy not to be sleeping on his back.

He glanced to the side. His hammock had been strung up near the edge of the deck, so he had a perfect view of everyone. The kids sprawled in a pile of blankets and feathers in the center; most of them were twisted so they could see him if they opened their eyes. Bentina was sitting on a cushion, leaning against the door to the houseboat lower level, eyes closed. He wasn't completely convinced she was actually asleep.

Della and Scrooge were curled together, sitting where Donald and Della had sat weeks ago now, drinking with Gladstone. They both looked like they had aged a hundred years in a night. He felt the same.

Indy Sabrewing still being there was a surprise. He was also awake, and glanced up when Donald shifted to get out of his hammock, shaking with the effort.

“Hey,” he said, very quiet. “Glad to see you’re awake. Everyone was worried.” Nobody stirred.

Donald winced at the reminder that he had run off on them. He hadn’t meant to scare everyone last night (and had it only been last night?), he’d just been- just been-

Panicked. Panicked and terrified and desperate, no energy left to fight and needing something, anything to take the edge off *enough* to call for help that always, always answered. Fleeing from his family before they could suggest anything more dangerous than what he was already facing, using every bit of his mind and soul to keep at bay.

Had he been able to speak, he might have requested they take the other way around; fly over the Pacific instead of the Atlantic. It was a longer flight, he was pretty sure, but he could have pulled the emergency release and-

No, he wouldn’t have. It would have put his family in danger. And by the time they’d been over the ocean, he’d been too far gone to save himself, even being in the water it wouldn’t have helped on its own. No, there hadn’t really been any other choices except the one he had made. Short of Panchito and José being with them, it had been the best he could do.

“Sorry for scaring everyone,” he replied after a long moment, voice creaking. He doubted Indy fully understood what he said, but the man nodded anyway, polite. Sympathetic. Probably well out of his depth in McDuck nonsense.

“No need to apologize,” Bentina piped up, eyes sliding open smoothly. “It was understandable, focusing on solving the issue over explaining

what you were doing. Though I do wonder at your choice to involve Magica de Spell."

Donald winced.

"That… isn't exactly what happened," he admitted. God that would make such a good excuse.

But it was a lie that Magica could easily reveal, if she chose, which would be a stupid mistake to make. He was *not* giving her any kind of leverage over him *right* after he got her off his back. And he didn't want to ask Lena to lie for him. To Scrooge, maybe, under the right circumstances, but not to Webby and Violet.

"Oh?" Bentina was completely alert now, watching him with sharp eyes.

"She showed up afterwards. She sensed some of the chaos, came to see if there was some kind of…" He shrugged. "Leverage, I guess."

Bentina's eyes narrowed.

"Blackmail?"

"Something like that," Donald said, trying to decide how to explain. Before he could add anything, he heard tires screeching on the sand, and glanced down the beach.

Gladstone's car was skidding to a stop, sand and dust still flying when

Gladstone himself shot out the door. His hair was wildly undone, he was only wearing his undershirt, no jacket, no hat. Donald jolted forwards, around the sleeping pile of people and over the gangplank. They met near the end of the pier, Gladstone hitting him like a ton of bricks.

"Glad?" Donald demanded, voice still hoarse and grating. Why was he so disheveled? Had he been attacked? They had *just* seen the woman from the auction, and the Blot was still on the loose, and it wasn't like Gladstone's luck made him completely immune to danger-

"Don! I just heard, are you okay? Panchito called me, asked me to come to check on you, they're stuck at their cabana and couldn't come right away, nice place by the way, I like the chaos-" Gladstone babbled into his shoulder, drawing Donald's thoughts to a sharp halt.

"Panchito called you?" Donald asked, startled. Gladstone's hands grazed over his body frantically, but they just barely brushed his back.

"Of course he did, you nearly died!"

Yes, Donald was aware. He was just puzzled by Panchito calling Gladstone of all people to check in on him.

Although… Panchito wasn't really in contact with any of Donald's family. Nor was José. If they wanted someone to check on Donald, their options were limited. They could possibly use Tweeter to reach the kids, but that wasn't really ideal.

But that all meant that Panchito had given Gladstone his number while they were snooping around the theater, which was… interesting.

“Stuck at the cabana?” He asked, because that was also weird. Between Ari and the sheer volume of unusual artifacts housed there, anything could happen, sure. But the day after he’d nearly died? And it was taking so long to resolve that they couldn’t come?

Some small part of him was hurt by that. He shoved the feeling down; they had saved his life, that was more important than driving to see him afterwards. Especially when he had no idea what their current dilemma was, how self-centered *was* he? He didn’t even know what had happened to the presence from the ruby…

Gladstone started to answer, but the kids had apparently woken at the sound of the engine and were fast approaching them. Donald, arms still stuck to his sides by Gladstone’s grip, couldn’t do anything to balance them as four small bodies smacked into his knees and they tumbled into a pile.

“Unca Donald! You’re awake!”

“Do you need anything? Water?”

“Why were you talking to Magica?!”

“Hi Uncle Gladstone.” This last came from Louie.

Donald breathed out his nose. Pulled himself, and therefore the rest of the pile, upwards so they could sit instead of sprawl.

Either the noise from the car or the shrieking of the boys had woken

up the remainder of the family; everyone was converging on their spot on the pier, and Donald really, really couldn't do this. He wanted more sleep, he wanted to be *alone,* not surrounded by questioning eyes and loud voices. It was overwhelming and cloying, and the urge to just dive into the water and retreat into blissful, cool silence was growing stronger by the minute.

"Alright, let's let your uncle up kids," Scrooge announced in a too-cheerful sort of voice, scooping Louie out of the pile and reaching for Dewey next. They both clung to Donald as they were lifted, but let go before he felt more than a mild tug. Gladstone pulled away as well, bringing Huey with him. Donald was left alone on the ground, Webby standing by his elbow, catching his breath like he'd run a marathon.

He didn't meet their eyes, feeling too exposed. This was- he wasn't-usually Donald was alone when he recovered from a near death experience. He wanted to sit alone somewhere for a while.

He wanted, selfishly, to not have to comfort his family right now. He wanted Scrooge, or god forbid *Della,* to take the kids and give him some *space* to think. Or not think, as it was. Notice that he couldn't *do this* right now-

"Hey kids," Gladstone said, drawing Donald out of his head, "Why don't we go to town quick and get some donuts? I think we deserve a treat, huh?"

They all turned to stare at him. Donald included. Gladstone leaned back on his heels, casually, but the effect was slightly ruined by his missing jacket; no pockets to put his hands into. The kids eyed him dubiously.

"Aye, go get us some treats. We'll have breakfast on the beach," Scrooge agreed, and if the kids looked iffy before, *now* they looked

mulish.

Donald could see the upcoming argument play out in his mind; the kids would insist they didn't want to go, Scrooge would lose his temper, Della would show up and throw herself into the argument before knowing what was going on, and even if they managed to convince them, it would take a while. The kids only listened when they *wanted* to, when they were in a group.

Except for…

The rest of the group had reached their spot; Lena and Violet slid up next to Webby, Indy lingered at the back.

"But…" Huey started, clearly struggling between not wanting to leave and the weight of several adults telling him to go. His eyes met Donald's.

Donald smiled, as cheerful as he could manage.

"Think you can find us some boston creams?" He asked, internally wincing at the betrayal in Huey's eyes. He knew Huey wanted an excuse to stay, all of the kids did, but he couldn't do this, he just couldn't. He could make it up later, he *would,* but he couldn't handle appearing okay right now, and the cracks were already showing.

"I'm just going to take a shower," he added, glancing at the others. He forced a smirk onto his face and eyed Dewey. "Betcha can't get back before I get out."

Dewey gave him a weak grin.

“Sure, bet we can,” he said, and the others seemed to take that as the sign they weren’t going to win, and slowly trooped towards Gladstone’s car.

How they would all fit, Donald didn’t know, but right now he didn’t care. Or, he did, he should, but it was a distant feeling, far behind the desperate need to get away from the crowd.

“Don?” Della asked, kneeling next to him. Donald let out a shuddering breath.

“Is- do you need something?” She continued, when he didn’t respond.

“Space, I believe, is what he needs,” Bentina said briskly, reaching out a hand to help him up. Donald took it, still shaky, and got to his feet with a groan.

“Yeah, I- I’ll be back in a minute,” he said, mumbled really, and stepped away, towards the houseboat. As soon as he was too far for them to grab, he bolted for the end of the pier and dove into the water, shouts dying away to the rush of water in his ears.

No Rest for the Wicked

Chapter Summary

Screw it, its the holidays. Bonus chapter for today!

Cold energy filled his mind, cool water rushing over his body as he swam through the waves. His mind felt soothed, his back relieved. There was nothing except the water and the salt on his tongue. The heat in his soul felt finally smothered, though he knew it was only until he emerged. You couldn't channel a volcano that long without taking some damage.

He couldn't stay here forever. Someone would probably jump in to check on him eventually, for one, and Donald's control over his magic was dubious at best right now. There was a decent chance it would be noticeable, especially in the water of all places. The fewer people that knew Donald was a trained mage, the fewer threats he would face because of it.

Even from his family. He trusted them, with his life even at times, but experience had taught him that his life was usually in his own hands, nobody else's.

And that was without considering the more unique details of Donald's magic.

His amulet pulsed, comfortingly. Panchito and José were clearly awake, and aware, but they felt… distracted. Distant. Still, he could feel love and contentment reach him, mixed with some anticipation that felt out of place. He'd have to call them when he had some time, find out what issue they were dealing with; but first he'd have to get out of the water.

He finally hauled himself back out, shaking the water off his feathers.

He'd definitely need a shower now; the water ran off his feathers, but it left a salty residue that wouldn't be pleasant when it dried.

He caught the briefest glimpse of the beach, with the limo sitting in some skid marks in the sand, but nobody was around.

"Would you *stop doing that?!"* Scrooge yelled in his ear, closer than Donald had expected. Donald shook his head again, making sure to splash some of it on his uncle, and gave him a dry look. He'd apparently been waiting on the edge of the pier, coat folded beneath him as a temporary seat.

"Blast it lad, you already scared the dickens out of all of us last night, can you at least take the minute to explain what's going on in your mind?!" Scrooge continued to yell, ignoring the growing puddle entirely and hauling Donald back to his feet. Donald glanced around again, confirming they were alone.

"Beakley thought you might prefer less people around," Scrooge grumbled, clearly put out by Donald's lack of attention. "So we can talk through what exactly happened yesterday."

"Not much point. The kids aren't going to let it go," Donald pointed out, wringing out his shirt. Scrooge nodded, looking fondly annoyed.

"Aye, like a dog with a bone, those kids. Still," and here Scrooge hesitated, eyeing Donald like he was a rabid animal.

"Still, if you're up to it, we can just talk, the two of us, and I'll give everyone else the basics. At least til you're up for filling in the gaps."

Oh.

Donald let himself be led to his own kitchen, took a mug of coffee in both hands. Watched Scrooge move awkwardly around the island and settle himself on the other side, a mug of tea in front of him.

“So…” Scrooge started.

“So. Where do you want me to start?”

Scrooge stared at him, like it should be obvious.

“Start from the beginning. What was happening with the- with the fire,” Scrooge said after a moment, “It should have…”

“Killed me?” Donald supplied, when Scrooge trailed off. The other duck winced.

“Aye. That.”

Donald sighed.

“Ah, the stone… it wasn’t just the power of the volcano. There was… something trapped inside,” Donald said quietly.

“A spirit?”

“A person, I think, probably the mage that supposedly created the gem. Or maybe it was a volcano spirit?” Donald offered.

“Either way, it wasn’t really… all there anymore. Whoever, whatever it was, they were trying to escape,” he continued. He’d been able to feel the desperation the whole time, scraping and clawing at him.

“By lighting people on fire,” Scrooge replied dubiously.

“By trying to channel itself through something so it could get out of the gem,” Donald countered, “The gem was created to hold the energy so it could be used, like a battery; to get out, the spirit needed someone to use it. Probably in one large burst so it wasn’t broken into a million shredded pieces first.”

Scrooge paused, frowning.

“So, the prior explorers…?”

“Best guess is they couldn’t handle it,” Donald said simply.

After all, it had looked like the village was only using it to keep hearths lit. It could have lasted them for millennia that way, slowly chipping away at whatever was trapped inside. God knew what kind of damage that alone had done, without even considering the imprisonment method.

A volcano had a lot of power to burn through. And elementals were rare enough as it was, it would be a one in a billion shot finding someone that could handle that amount of power being shot through them like a cannon.

Scrooge seemed to have come to the same conclusion, face going pale as he scanned Donald over again, like some new damage might reveal itself.

The coffee was still too hot, but Donald sipped at it anyway. It made for a decent distraction, if nothing else.

“Beakley said Magica wasn’t involved in getting rid of it,” Scrooge finally said, and honestly, Donald was shocked that hadn’t been his first question. Or statement, he supposed.

“She showed up after everything; think she saw the light show and was curious,” Donald explained briefly.

“Then why’d you help her? At first we thought it was a trade, but if she arrived after everything...”

“She came originally to blackmail me, she figured you’d throw a fit at… you know. Magic. When I told her you knew already-”

“Knew *what?”* Scrooge demanded, leaning forward with a fierce scowl.

“Knew I was magically on fire, obviously,” Donald replied blandly, watching him flinch back again. “She didn’t say what *she* thought was going on, I just made an assumption.”

Scrooge’s scowl remained in place, one eyebrow rising.

“Just made an assumption, eh?”

Donald shrugged, unbothered.

“Well, let her make one. Anyway, I asked her what she was hoping to get me to *do,* and when she said she was looking for her brother, I made her a deal instead.”

“Why even ask her,” Scrooge grumbled. “She couldn’t have much to offer you.” Donald shrugged again.

“She agreed to leave the kids out of your fights,” Donald told him. Scrooge blinked, then snorted and shook his head.

“You would,” he said, and didn’t elaborate. Donald opted to sip more of his coffee. He was still waiting for the obvious question.

Scrooge sat in silence instead of asking anything else, face twisted as he considered the table in front of them. He had the same face he had when faced with a temple puzzle, mind going a mile a minute. Making connections faster than anyone Donald had ever met, though the kids could give him a run for his money. They would surpass Scrooge someday; they’d surpass them all.

Finally, Scrooge looked back up.

“So, magic.”

Helpful. Donald stared back, lifting one eyebrow.

“You knew how to handle that- that spell. Knew how to deal with it, insisted on coming *here* to do it,” Scrooge continued, clearly no longer speaking to Donald. He was staring into the distance, tapping his fingers on the table.

“Why did you need to come home?” He asked, looking back at Donald.

Donald bit his lip, clutching his mug. He couldn’t- his own training was one thing, but outing Panchito and José, so to speak? That was another thing.

But Scrooge wasn’t *stupid.* If Donald claimed he’d done it alone, Scrooge would want to know why he waited until they got back. If he said he’d needed to be near the ocean, he’d obviously ask why he hadn’t demanded they land early. Or why the Viking village wouldn’t work, and Donald didn’t want to talk about why he never wanted to go back there.

He thought he remembered Webby mentioning his temporary death via freeze ray, on the flight. She’d been wrong, sadly. That wasn’t the time he’d died by being frozen, (that honor went to a Paperinik mission, and only Uno had known about it), but he could hardly blame her for being confused. And he *had* nearly died.

It had just been an hours-long ordeal after they’d lifted him out of the freezer, not his heart stopping in one brief moment. He could still feel that never ending *cold-*

“Donald?”

He couldn’t do this.

“Lad?”

He couldn’t *do this*-

Donald got up, coffee sloshing over his hands, shuffling to get out of his chair. He needed- he needed a shower, that was right, the kids would be back soon and they needed to keep up the ruse or they’d be hurt-

“Donald!”

Two hands on his shoulders. Two wide eyes met his. His chest burned with worry, the amulet a weight around his neck.

“Lad, it’s just a question,” Scrooge said, baffled. Donald breathed out of his nose, trying to focus. He needed to calm down. He needed to answer.

He needed to *breathe.*

The amulet pulsed again. He hissed a breath out of his teeth, as slow as he could, and drew in another one. He sent calm, as calm as he had available, back to the gem, and took one more gulp of air.

“Sorry, just- sorry,” he said, settling back into his seat. “I had help,

that's why I needed to get home. I've- I knew they could help."

Scrooge frowned at him, but he didn't look annoyed, exactly. Partially confused, partially concerned, if Donald had to guess.

"Help you don't want me to know about," he finally said, reclaiming his mug off the table. Donald nodded, reaching for his coffee and wincing when his sleeve dragged through the small puddle on the table.

"Not just you," he said carefully, considering, "After everything with the Phantom Blot, I just… can't." Scrooge's eyes went wide at that.

"Didn't realize you were all that involved with that. Besides helping Cabrera, I suppose," he said. Donald snorted a humorless laugh at that.

"Right. Uninvolved," he chuckled, shaking his head. Who did Scrooge think he was?

Scrooge paused, hand hovering in midair like he'd forgotten about it, before his eyes caught Donald's again. They were sharp, focused. Donald felt his gaze shy away, looking at the table again.

"Donald, are you- you clearly have some magical training. The Blot, did... Did he ever…?" Scrooge started, hesitated. It was strange to see him so uncertain. Strange enough that Donald answered before he'd really thought about it.

"He shot me about eight times, I think," he said blankly, staring into his mug. "Fun way to find out I *could* have been a warlock."

Or a wizard, maybe, but Donald didn't like that style of magic, at least in the theoretical sense. It hadn't mattered, in the end. The Blot's weapons didn't just drain the magic in a person, taking anything they had been able to create. They also lost their ability to reshape the power around them. Permanently.

The shock of the removal had killed most of the victims immediately; the survivors had to find ways to live with the loss, like they'd lost a limb or a sense. Their world fundamentally altered in ways nobody else could really understand. Most of them had said they could still *feel* magic around them, which made it worse; it was right at their fingertips, same as it had always been, but if they tried to use it…

At first, he'd thought that the Blot's gun had no effect, and the weird nausea he constantly felt was a result of the case details. That the burning feeling that kept growing was some rage he couldn't process yet.

It wasn't until he'd met one of the other survivors, who talked about how they kept trying to pull magic in naturally, like it was attracted to the emptiness in them, only to have it backfire and explode out in an uncontrollable, agonizing burst, that he'd put the pieces together.

He'd never told anyone. It didn't matter, not really. He'd never used it, hadn't even known it was *there,* he didn't need the same treatment as the others, and what point was there in telling people that he was also hurting? They didn't know him. There was no cure.

And he'd wanted to avoid what was currently happening; Scrooge staring at him with some confused mess of emotions Donald couldn't parse. Pity was in there somewhere, he thought. Horror. Surprise. Maybe some relief, that Donald would not, could not, become a warlock. Or maybe Donald was reading too far into it.

“He- when could he have- are you alright?!”

Donald blinked at him, nonplussed.

“It was twenty years ago,” he replied blankly. Scrooge shook his head.

“I’m only finding out now! You’ll have to forgive me for reacting to new information!” He exclaimed, throwing up his hands.

“You don’t need to react! It doesn’t matter!”

“Like hell it doesn’t! You’re telling me that- that some crazed terrorist *shot* you years ago! That you could have been some powerful warlock or some such thing, but you got attacked by that blasted creep in a hood! And you never said anything! *Yes,* I need to react to that!”

“You *knew* I was friends with- wait. Powerful?” Donald pulled back, surprise wiping his anger away. Scrooge scoffed.

“You’re *my* nephew. If you wanted to learn all that nonsense, of course you’d be powerful,” he said, like it was obvious. Like Donald learning magic wouldn't have written him a one-way ticket to being disowned for being such a disappointment.

Donald had no idea *what* to say to that, and opted to finish the cold coffee in a single gulp, coughing when it slid down the wrong pipe.

“So… you learned some magic mumbo-jumbo after the Blot attacked you? Just to know it? Was that spell circle yours?” Scrooge asked, while Donald caught his breath.

“I- yeah, it was my circle,” Donald choked out. “I can do a spell if I have a power source, it’s just not really worth the trouble… I was trying to… I wrote that one years ago. Didn’t work that time, though.”

“Didn’t work?” Scrooge asked; it was throwing Donald off that he was so… calm, about Donald being magically trained.

“It couldn’t search off-planet,” Donald explained quietly. Scrooge took a sharp breath.

They sat in silence for a long minute.

“I should take a quick shower, or Dewey will be mad I lied to him,” Donald finally said into the quiet. Scrooge nodded, clearly lost in thought, and Donald slipped away.

When Donald emerged, nobody was in the houseboat, but he could hear voices outside. Sounded like the kids had, indeed, beaten him out of the shower.

He found everyone was set up on the beach, blankets and low chairs set into the sand. A pile of donut boxes teetering in the middle. Bentina saw him first, and slid to the side to give him room to sit. He was immediately handed a boston cream-filled donut.

Nobody asked him any questions. The boys bracketed his sides, Della

hovered without saying anything of substance. Scrooge kept glancing at him with a contemplative expression. Bentina was the only person acting like everything was normal.

"-and then dad sat on him to make him sleep cause it was like three in the morning at that point," Gosalyn was saying, sprawling against Launchpad's side, giving Dewey a cheerful wave. He'd missed the first part of the story, but based on LP's sheepish expression, Donald was assuming that she was explaining where they had been this morning.

"You'd already been awake for hours flying home, you needed sleep," Drake insisted, before he looked back at Donald. "Er, heard you were a bit under the weather, thought we could stop by and check in, I guess? Not really sure what the protocol is here."

He looked so *contrite,* like he should know how to handle a *McDuck* (or really, a Donald Duck) style emergency. Like that wasn't a specialized skill. Like it didn't take an entire lifetime to get used to it.

Donald snorted a startled laugh, then another, before he fell into a laughing fit, leaning forward to choke into his knees. It wasn't funny, not really, but in the moment, it was the most hysterical thing he'd ever heard.

He heard a few others laugh as well, but his eyes were squeezed shut and he couldn't quite tell who it was over himself.

"I'll get you the guidebook later," he forced out between chuckles after a minute, reaching around to pat Drake on the knee; the poor duck still looked terribly out of place.

"Heh," Drake finally replied. "Kinda thought this would be at a hospital or something, the way Launchpad was going on. I mean-"

Drake stopped, face twisting in instant regret, while everyone stared at him.

“I mean, it sounded serious?” He continued bravely after a momentary pause. Donald shrugged, unbothered.

“Magical injury; I’m missing most of the feathers on my back, but that’s about all,” Donald explained. Drake blinked at him, then nodded, slowly.

“Well, glad it’s not too bad? Gos and I came by to, I don't know, drop off a casserole or something,” Drake said, grinning sheepishly and gesturing vaguely to some grocery bags sitting near him. One had a ‘Get Well Soon!’ balloon attached to it.

Donald found himself surprised, and a bit charmed at the idea of someone making him dinner because they thought he was ill. The boys had tried a few times, when they were younger, but nothing like that had happened since they were little and thought that a bowl of cereal with extra sugar sprinkled on top was a treat.

“I wouldn’t say no to having a day off from cooking,” he said with a bright smile. Drake’s shoulders drooped down in relief.

Drake stepped away to put the food he’d bought in Donald’s kitchen, and Gosalyn convinced the other kids to play some volleyball on the beach, leaving Donald alone with the adults of the family.

He eyed the group dubiously; Della was in good spirits now, chattering about some brand new tome she thought would make a good next adventure. She was just... also not moving more than a few inches away from him.

Gladstone, on the other hand, was playing at nonchalance fairly well, but Donald could see the underlying tension. He wasn't really talking, just piping up now and again with short, simple answers. He kept glancing back at his bungalow; it wasn't done yet, but it would be very soon. Donald was amused to find he was more excited than he'd expected. He also surely owed Glad breakfast at this point, at the very least, and that would be easier if the gander was staying here instead of the hotel.

Bentina was acting entirely normal, besides the fact that she was still *there.* She'd even slept on the boat, and that alone told Donald she had been worried. Launchpad, full of nervous energy, drawing aimless doodles in the sand, donut in one hand.

Indy was relaxed against a rock, not really part of things; Donald wondered if he was lingering just so the girls could stick around. He appreciated it, the kids could use some more friends around at the moment. Friends, and a distraction.

He needed to check in on them, make sure they weren't feeling too much lingering fear or god forbid, guilt. But it would take a careful hand, making sure they felt supported but not cornered.

His hands weren't careful right now; even now they were shaky, and his breath stuttered when he felt the breeze over his back. It was irritating, in a distant sort of way; he wanted to already be over all of this, hated the lingering sense of paranoia and fear. He was *fine,* and he needed to be the adult in the room for his kids. That meant he needed to have his own mind in order!

Donald conceded this wasn't the healthiest mindset, and his therapist would probably be concerned if they heard his thought process, but if it got him settled, he'd take it. Even if it was temporary.

After a bit the group moved to the shade, watching the kids play in the sand, and Donald made his way to the other hammock, in the trees. Nobody stopped him, which was a relief. He didn't sleep, but he was able to close his eyes and breathe.

Of course, his family wouldn't be his family if they weren't pushy. Nosy. Unable to leave things be for long. So he was entirely unsurprised to have visitors maybe ten minutes after he wasn't part of the group anymore.

"Are you sure you're alright, Unca Donald?" Huey asked, hovering next to his elbow with a glass of water. Donald hoisted himself into a semi-upright position, smiling at his nephew. He ruffled his hair, before fixing the hat carefully.

"I'm sure," he said, as clearly as he could, "I'm just tired after all that. I promise, some sleep and I'll be back to normal."

"But you- it was really bad, and you were like that for *hours-"*

"And now it's healing. Really, I can show you if you want, there's nothing to do except grow the feathers back." Which was a pain, but using healing spells to regrow fur and feathers had a tendency to go off the rails. Donald didn't particularly want his back feathers to come in blue, or with albatross feathers instead of his own. Sometimes you just had to be patient.

Huey did want to look, and he was quiet for a long time while Donald sat upright, shirt pulled back to show the smooth skin.

“How come it didn’t scar? Even magic fires should cause burns, right?” Huey asked, tentatively.

“Magic is a bit funny; if you stop a spell before it’s finished, things don’t usually scar. If the spell had been completed, it would probably have left a mark,” Donald explained, tugging his shirt back into place. The real damage wasn't physical, but Huey didn’t need to know that part. Huey frowned.

“This spell would have killed you,” he pointed out, then looked like he immediately regretted his words. Donald forced a chuckle.

“I’m glad it didn’t. Not sure how I would make pancakes as a ghost,” he said cheerfully, “Might have had to ask Duckworth for tips.”

Huey giggled, despite himself. He made Donald finish the glass of water before he went back to his siblings on the beach.

Webby was next, after another hour or so of dozing, Violet and Lena in tow, with Violet’s notebook already open to a blank page.

“So… can we ask what the gem actually was? Because we’ve been going over all of our notes about gemstones, and even an enchanted stone should have stopped the spell once it broke, that would mean it was powerless at that point-” Webby babbled, bouncing up onto some of the rocks near the hammock, while Donald moved to sit back up again. Lena watched him curiously; he wondered what she had said to the others about the night before. Had she told them anything?

God, now he regretted letting Scrooge handle the explanations; he had *no* idea what they all thought they knew.

Violet was staring with unabashed fascination. The pen in her hands was almost trembling in anticipation.

“There was a sentient person inside it,” Donald explained quietly. “They were trying to escape the gem, that’s why it cracked when it hit me. They threw themselves out of the gem, and without them, it broke apart.”

“Wait, that was a *person?* What happened to them?” Webby demanded, echoed by the Sabrewings.

That… was a good question. Donald had felt Panchito pull the fire away, gathered the flailing limbs and fear into a ball, then seemed to… he didn't know. Encase it? It had felt content when he’d pulled away, like it was safe again after so long afraid, but Donald couldn’t quite put together what had happened.

“I called a friend who took it away,” Donald finally answered. “I’ll have to ask them what happened, exactly.”

Webby frowned, squinting at him, then at Lena.

“Who was your friend? Is it someone we know? Cause Scrooge wouldn’t say, and Lena didn’t know. Was that who you were gonna ask the whole time?”

Donald nodded.

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t explain at the time, but yes, that was my plan,” he confirmed.

“It’s okay,” Webby said quietly. “Things were kinda scary.”

“And my friend… let me ask them first if they’re okay with people knowing they’re a mage, okay? Some people like to keep that a secret,” he continued. Really, it was more *him* that wanted things secret, more than Panchito and José cared. But Webby nodded slowly; she looked like she was plotting. Donald recalled the kids were trying to find all of his old friends, and winced. She was probably running through a list of potential options now.

“So, the gemstone was not a magical storage device, but some kind of prison?” Violet asked, leaning forward.

“I don’t know if they intended to trap a person or if they got caught up in the flow,” Donald admitted, thinking it over. “If an elemental was connected to the volcano magic at the time, they could have been pulled in accidentally.”

It was the kindest explanation: the villagers acting to save themselves, unknowingly hurting someone else. A fire spirit, or lava lizard maybe, that nobody knew would be there and didn’t realize was missing.

But Donald recalled the door, and how the ‘mage’ and ‘gem’ runes were being used interchangeably. Like the carvers had known they were one and the same.

Elemental magic was a whole separate kind of magic, connecting to the flow of the power itself instead of drawing it into oneself. It was dangerous for mortals.

It was *taboo* for mortals. The briefest, slightest loss of control could

spell disaster, and not just for the person doing it. If the village became aware that someone was doing so, and they had even a single mage present that realized what they were seeing…

Donald wanted to pretend he thought there was no intentional harm. Just an accident. But he wasn't stupid enough to think that, nor did he truly think it mattered. The villagers were long dead, and he doubted that their victim cared if they had *meant* to hurt them or not.

"What is an elemental?" Violet asked, leaning forward. Donald dragged his thoughts back to the girls in front of him.

"It's a creature, or person, that's directly connected to their element. They don't have to take magic into themselves, like a witch does, it's more like directing the flow," Donald explained carefully. Violet frowned, taking a quick note.

"What would be an example of an elemental?" She asked, head tilting to one side. Donald bit down a fond sigh; at least it wasn't more questions about his near death experience yesterday, he supposed.

"Harpies," he answered, "they're tied to the wind and air."

"You can't use the wind for magic, you'll suffocate," Lena argued immediately, arms crossing. Webby looked between them, eyes wide.

"You can't *take* the wind," Donald corrected, gently. "It *can* be used. It's the difference between using the wind to fly a kite and trying to trap it in a bottle."

Lena frowned at him. Violet was still writing. Webby was staring at

the two of them like she couldn't decide if she wanted to break them up or get popcorn.

"I don't understand the distinction," Violet admitted, cutting the tension. She was frowning down at her notebook, covered with neat handwriting and small sigils.

"It's… hmm. Elemental creatures tend to understand it instinctively," Donald said thoughtfully. "Or they're taught by their families. So it's not something that most people need to understand besides academically."

Lena's eyes had narrowed.

"What about people? Not creatures?" She asked. Donald met her eyes calmly.

"Mortals usually can't do elemental magic," he replied bluntly. "It's considered a taboo to even try. Even if it wasn't, it's a lot more dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Webby asked, immediately interested.

"Taboo?" Violet asked, pen back at the ready.

"Elemental species are built to handle that kind of power, mortals aren't," Donald said. "It's likely to kill anyone that tries, and then things tend to backfire. Nobody wants to be in that blast radius, either."

Lena was still eyeing him suspiciously. Webby was chattering with Violet about something she had written, but in Sumerian, and Donald didn't want the headache trying to understand them, so he didn't try to translate.

They were still whispering to each other when tires yet again screeched against the sand, dragging Donald's attention to the beach.

José's car was finally, *finally,* driving across the sand.

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Donald didn't remember moving. One moment, he was sitting up in the hammock, spotting José's bright feathers in the driver's seat, Panchito waving from the open window. The next breath, he was slamming full speed into Panchito, knees stinging from his leap out of the hammock, gripping the other bird tight while José slid around to join their circle.

Donald wasn't crying. He was shaking, unless there was a very localized earthquake going on, but he wasn't crying. His face was hot, and dry, shoved into Panchito's throat as everything truly came crashing into him.

He could have died. He could have *died,* hours away from them, they would have taken days to find out. God, his *kids* would have had to *watch.* Dewey would never have gotten over it. None of them would have, they shouldn't have to see *anyone* die in front of them!

And Scrooge and Della were so convinced their family could survive anything, would they have even realized what had happened? Would they have scoured the temple, trying to find some proof Donald was still around, being held hostage or teleported elsewhere? How long would they have lingered, looking for evidence that nothing had gone wrong, evidence that didn't exist?

He shuddered, and there were gentle hands rubbing circles on his back. So soft, barely grazing, and it was good and yet awful, a reminder that he'd been hurt, and no matter that his whole family had been there, he had felt so awfully, terribly alone in that moment.

"I called," Donald whispered, hardly aware of the words leaving his mouth. "I called for help, I promised and I did it."

“I know, amor,” Panchito murmured.

José said nothing, humming under his breath. The sun was baking down on them, and Donald was too *hot,* but he didn’t want to move.

He wanted, abruptly, for a new Kingdom Hearts issue to come up. He could go, and by the time he got back his head would be screwed on straight. He could come back and everything would be fine, just like the family was desperately trying to pretend it was right now. His family needed him to be back to normal, but he needed *time* to get there, time he didn’t have.

Nobody spoke, but Donald could feel eyes on him, so slowly, reluctantly, he pulled back, taking a small step to regain some space that he didn’t really want.

Everyone was watching them. He hated being watched, wished he could slip into the shadows and leave. Della was approaching, face frozen in a painfully casual grin, one hand raised in a cheerful wave.

“Hey guys! Nice to see you, it’s been a while!” She called as she reached them. José and Panchito glanced at each other. José’s eyes narrowed, Panchito nodded.

“Hola Della, it is nice to see you,” José replied, sliding in front of them with a graceful shift. It almost looked incidental, how he was blocking them both with his body. Just a coincidence that Donald and Panchito were now behind him, crowded against the side of the car. “How have you been?”

Della frowned at him.

“Ah- well, you know, still getting used to being back on earth and all, and oh! Did you know I was on the moon?” Without waiting for an answer, she started in on her usual story with almost manic enthusiasm.

Panchito nodded, far more subdued than usual, and it was then that Donald noted he had a bag of some kind on his back. It was shockingly round, it looked like he had a soccer ball inside.

No, not quite a ball, it was slightly narrower at the top. And it seemed to be glowing slightly, there was a reddish light seeping out from the edges of the seams…

Donald blinked. Panchito caught his eye, and he was already smiling sheepishly, hands raising like he planned to ward Donald off.

“Panchito,” Donald hissed, remembering to switch to Spanish at the absolute last second, “ *is that an **egg** ?!”*

Panchito smiled wider, and without looking at them, José winced. Della paused, staring at them.

“ *Ah, that is why we were late* ?” He offered, also in Spanish. Donald huffed an incredulous laugh, and gestured at the bag again.

“ *Late?! I don’t care that you were late, where did you get an egg?”* He demanded. Panchito reached towards the strap, then seemed to think better of it and let his hands fall again.

“ *Well, when we were able to free you from the lava spirit last night, I reformed it into an egg?”* Panchito explained, and Donald let out a

noise, he didn't even know what it was, and Della scoffed.

"You know, I'm standing right here," she grumbled, "maybe talk in a language everyone understands?"

"We were having a *private* conversation before you walked up," Donald growled back, staring at the bag instead of his twin.

An egg. An *egg!* What species was it even? Were they okay in there, or did they feel trapped again? What would they even hatch into?

What were they going to *do?*

"You're all kinda standing in the middle of the beach, it's not exactly private!" Della snapped, and Donald nodded briskly.

"Right then, come on guys, let's go," he ordered, grabbing their hands and tugging towards the houseboat. They both came easily; Panchito squeezed his fingers. Donald squeezed back, mind still whirling. José's fingers twined between Donald's.

"Wait, that isn't-" Della protested, but Donald stopped listening.

"Unca Donald, are you alright?" Louie called when they passed, and Donald nodded, absently.

"Yes, fine, just need a minute!"

“Lad, you’re looking a bit stressed…” Scrooge said tentatively.

“I always look stressed!” Donald retorted. Why wouldn’t they leave him alone?!

“Er, why is his bag glowing…?” Lena asked, and Donald pulled harder, all but running to the relative privacy of his boat.

Out of the sun, he collapsed onto the couch, dragging the pair with him, groaning.

“Explain,” he mumbled, but he didn’t really need more information, he'd already reached some obvious conclusions (god, Panchito had *forged* an *egg,* just like that!); he just didn’t want to have to speak yet.

“We came back to ourselves holding the egg,” José began carefully. “We spent this morning trying to get more information about what it may hatch into, if there is anything we ought to do. I am sorry, that we were delayed in our arrival.”

Donald grunted a response to the apology, already over it. Priorities, he understood them. And kids took top of the list.

“Will it hatch into a dragon, that was my first question,” Panchito added cheerfully, carefully dragging the satchel to sit on his lap. The bag had opened, and inside Donald could now see the egg. It had the same crackled red appearance the ruby had, but now it pulsed with a gentle glow instead of the harsh red it had held before. Unbidden, his hands came up and, when Panchito didn’t stop him, he rested one palm gently on the surface.

It was warm. Just slightly more than a normal egg. Under his hand, a tentative press back, like whatever was inside was reaching for him.

He sighed, shoulders loosening.

“And?” He asked. “Is it a dragon?”

They could figure out how to raise a dragon, right? Dragons weren’t terribly social, but surely one would be willing to give them the basics. And there were probably books on the subject *somewhere.* How hard could it be?

“Ah, no, we made a trip out to visit Eileithyia and Artemis, at the gods new temple at the World Tree; did you know they all left Ithaquack?” Donald nodded, so José continued. “They don’t know exactly what will hatch, but they were both confident it will be avian of some kind. A new baby, perhaps a reincarnation, but they won’t be… who they were before, exactly.”

“I think they will be a rooster!” Panchito insisted immediately, and based on how José sighed it was clearly an argument they’d been having all morning.

“And I believe that just because *you,* amor, are a fire mage, this does not mean that the egg will hatch into a rooster,” he replied, leaning against Donald’s shoulder so they could both peer at the egg. Donald’s hand was still resting on the surface.

“It’s going to be a phoenix,” Donald declared bleakly.

“You sound very certain,” Panchito pointed out with a soft smile.

Donald snorted.

“Their babies light on fire, constantly. It’s the most inconvenient species they *could* be, so that’s what they’re gonna be,” he replied. Panchito and José shared a look over his head.

“... does that mean you are… That is…” José started, then stopped.

“We didn’t want to assume, that you were okay with this,” Panchito continued, and Donald finally looked up to stare him in the eye.

“We *all* helped create this egg,” he said, stifling a wild giggle, “Maybe not the *fun* way, but we did. It’s ours. Of course I’m *okay* with raising them.”

“Donal’,” Panchito said, gently, “they *did* almost kill you. You don’t have to be okay.”

Donald blinked, feeling phantom flames lick down his spine, and he looked back down at the egg. It almost seemed to dim, as he looked at it, like the tiny creature inside could feel what he was feeling.

“It’s a baby,” he said, after a long moment, “it’s not like it was on purpose.”

He placed his hand on it again. The touch this time was more eager.

No, he decided, he couldn’t resent this tiny thing for trying to survive. He’d lived, there were no physical scars, the magical ones would heal.

He was just fine.

"Donald…" José said carefully, still draped over Donald's back. "You do not *have* to be fine. You can still be hurt and scared. We know you are big and brave already, you do not need to put on a mask for us."

Donald snorted a laugh. No, he didn't, but if he really, truly broke down here, he wouldn't recover in time to face his family, who no doubt were waiting just outside, with questions and demands and needs.

"It's not for you," he pointed out, then shook the thoughts off. "I just need some time, I'll be alright. Now, the bigger question," he added, looking around.

"What are we going to *do?!* We don't even live together! I don't have room for a nursery anymore, I'll have to completely redo the floor plan to make space, and you're both living in the cabana!"

He tried to stand up to pace, but José went limp, keeping him pinned to the couch while Panchito slid the egg slightly to the side to lean against Donald's front instead.

"Do you think we haven't thought of these things?" He chuckled, tapping Donald on the beak. "We are going to set up a nursery in the girls' old room at the cabana, for when the egg hatches, and Ari has been happily creating a nest for us to share while we are brooding. Whether it is habitable, we will have to see, but the effort is very kind of him!"

"And I have acquired a solution to us not living together," José added. Donald twisted, best he could to peer at the side of his face. He could just make out a smug grin.

“Oh?” He asked, pretending to be unimpressed. “Did you get a teleport spell while you were visiting the gods temple?”

“Close,” José chuckled, and he stood up. Unbalanced, Donald tumbled to the floor. Panchito managed to catch himself on the coffee table, the egg held in the crook of his knee.

José hopped away from the mess gracefully, and glanced around. Donald had no idea what he was looking for, and focused on dragging himself to his feet and fussing over Panchito and the egg on the couch. Panchito dealt with it with a smile, not even complaining when Donald resettled the egg in its bag a fourth time, smoothing the fabric over again. And again.

His mind was a loop of anxiety and *baby! New fledgling coming!*

What was he going to tell the boys? They were going to freak out when he told them, even without knowing about the new egg’s origins.

Ugh, and between Della and Scrooge’s inevitable explosions? Maybe he should take the kids on a trip.

A *long* trip. Eighteen years sounded good.

José found what he was looking for, which was apparently… the door to the storage room. Room was overselling it, it was more of a closet, usually filled with winter coats and whatever odds and ends hadn’t found a home yet. Donald had been meaning to clean it out, and if he had to find space for a nursery anyway…?

He *did* have the spare bedroom, since Storkules had moved out and left it empty. But he'd been thinking of making that into a room for Webby; there was a trundle bed under Louie's bunk in the boys room, but it wasn't really the same as having a bed.

It was probably a bit silly to prioritize making that space for Webby, since she had only stayed overnight maybe twice, and that had been for sleepovers with the boys. But he wanted to make sure she had her own space, even if it was rarely used.

He sighed, considering how to move things around. He'd probably have to use magic to expand the houseboat a bit.

It wasn't that doing so was *hard,* exactly. But magical architecture could be fussy if it wasn't done perfectly, and could easily come undone or become unstable if he didn't anchor the spell correctly. He could do it, but it would take some planning.

José was placing something on the doorframe, a long cord with two small amulets on it. He pinned it at each corner so that they hung on either side of the door, and then nodded decisively, stepping back.

"Come look!" He called, gesturing happily at his work.

"You've… decorated my closet?" Donald guessed, peering at it. He'd expected a spell, honestly. There was no glow or energy that would clearly identify one, so he was left peering at the small amulets on the cord. They were more like charms, very small and easy to miss.

"Ah, but try opening it!"

Donald squinted suspiciously at José, who smiled innocently back, then glanced over at Panchito, who was watching from the couch with excitement.

“Is this going to drop a bucket of water on my head?” He asked.

“I would never- well, no I have done that. Not this time!” José insisted, holding up both hands in protest. Donald gave him another look, then turned back and opened the door. A flicker of light came from the charms as he did.

It took a second to work out what he was looking at. He’d expected the dark, cluttered closet, and the room beyond *was* dark. But while it was familiar, it was not the closet.

He blinked at the room, twice, before he tentatively took a step in, through the doorway and into his old bedroom at the cabana. He stepped further, smelling the slightly musty room; it still smelled like dirt, the result of being underground, and the barest hint of smoke (he’d never found out why, but Panchito had looked guilty for weeks). He staggered, the difference between the gently rocking boat and the bedroom throwing off his balance, and he caught the doorway with one hand.

He turned back, to stare at José and Panchito, something wild and bright growing in his chest.

“You- you connected the houses?”

Spells like *that,* they were *rare.* Hard to find, harder to make, and to make one that was stable was nigh impossible if you weren’t an expert

in spacial magic. Xandra couldn't even do this without her atlas, and those were tied to predetermined locations, she couldn't just choose one! José was *not* a reality mage , and none of the gods that he'd mentioned visiting were either, so where…?

"We went one other place while we were gone today," Panchito explained, standing now with the egg strapped to his chest. "Goblin Town. There are a few folks there that remembered how to make that portal from Stonehenge. One of them, very tall fellow, was happy to make a matching set."

Donald glanced up at the door frame. On this side, another set of charms were hung, over the door that led to the closet on this side.

"And! To use the closet again, you only have to take them down!" José added eagerly. He looked ecstatic, and Donald felt his own excitement growing.

"We can go through at any time?" He demanded, jumping back through to his houseboat. His knees rocked a bit with the change, the boat bobbing in the waves, but besides that it felt like just going from room to room.

"Whenever we want!"

"Why didn't we think of this *years* ago?!" He shouted, but he was laughing, and Panchito was laughing, José chuckling into his hand.

"Ah, they are slightly range-tied. The doorway may be less stable if you, say, travel back to Bresil," José explained. "Perhaps in an emergency, but best not to test it if we do not need to, yes?"

“Don’t care, we basically live together again, we’re having a *baby,* I need to get so much stuff done around here, we can have dinner together now, I should tell the boys so they don’t find things accidentally,” Donald chattered, mostly to himself, swinging the three of them around in a twirling movement. He was giggling, and his partners were laughing, and for a moment everything was just joy and excitement-

“A baby?!” A voice shouted from outside. Donald skidded to a stop, peering out the windows.

“Boys!” He roared, instinctively, and winced when both José and Panchito flinched back to cover their ears.

“... no?” The same voice called back from the deck. Donald sighed. Dewey was a lot of things, but a good liar wasn’t one of them. He could spin a tale at the drop of a hat, but he was no Louie.

“Huey, Dewey, Louie, come in here, please. Anyone else potentially on my boat, private conversation!”

He hesitated, considering Webby again, but he hadn’t raised her, and as fond as he was of his new niece, this conversation needed to be with his boys.

The three of them trooped in, jittery, and beyond he could see, well, just about everyone. Drake and Launchpad were near the back, he doubted they could hear anything, but Scrooge and Della were just behind the boys, both staring with nearly identical looks of shock.

Donald stomped forward and yanked the door shut before they could recover and try to come in anyway.

“You’re having a baby?!” Dewey demanded the second the door was closed. Donald nodded, feeling a dopey smile cross his face. He ushered everyone to the kitchen; it was further from the deck, hopefully their group of eavesdroppers wouldn’t be able to listen in.

Actually, based on the scuffling on deck, someone was making sure they couldn’t be overheard. He’d have to thank Bentina, it sounded like she was ushering everyone off whether they liked it or not.

“Since when?” Huey asked, frantic, like he was afraid he’d missed something important.

“I just found out a few minutes ago,” Donald reassured him, and set about making hot chocolate. It was warm out, but he didn’t really think that mattered. Life’s surprises were just easier to handle with a warm drink in hand.

The boys twisted to stare at Panchito, who had slipped into the kitchen to lean against the counters. The egg sat obviously against his chest, glow visible in the dim light of the room.

“Wait, isn’t that-” Louie started.

“That’s the weird gemstone that tried to *kill you!”* Dewey finished, pointing dramatically.

“Didn’t Uncle Scrooge say someone helped you get rid of it?” Huey asked, before he blinked at Panchito, clearly connecting the dots. It wasn’t really a hard connection to make, Donald conceded, even as he braced himself for the explosion.

“Guys, you alright telling this part?” He asked, already feeling himself tensing. His hands gripped the counter.

“Yes, though at some point we do need to know what happened before you called,” José replied, appearing to sit across from the boys. It gave Donald a bit of space to breathe, as they focused on José instead. Panchito gave him a concerned look.

“Your tío called Panchito and myself to assist in removing the fire spell,” José was explaining. “When we did so, we all came to realize it was alive, not merely a spell or curse, and more than that, it was… hmm.”

“It was a child, and very scared and alone,” Panchito took over, “And when we had it away from Donal’, I was able to help, so that is what I did. I gave it a safe place to heal. ”

“That being an egg?” Huey asked, leaning forward. His eyes kept darting between Donald and the egg in question. Panchito laughed.

“There is nowhere safer for a little one!” He crowed, one hand running down the side of the shell. It occurred to Donald that he and José were probably also freaked out, maybe more so than he was; he was the only one with any experience raising children. They both had helped with family members, cousins, nieces and nephews, but it was different when you were the parent.

He remembered seeing the boys’ eggs for the first time and falling in love, right then and there, like he had imprinted on them before he even saw their eyes. It had been nearly overwhelming.

The shock of being their sole guardian had come months later, and he'd been nearly catatonic with fear and doubts and love, all while mourning his other losses.

"So, you're both wizards or something?" Louie asked now, "Cause Unca Donald said he needed magical help to fix things."

"Mage, I think, is the more accurate word for things," José said thoughtfully. "But yes, we are. My family has used shadow magicks for many generations, though I am slightly out of practice."

Donald felt incredibly grateful for José in that moment, as he deftly skipped over their other magical talents without a thought. That topic was a whole other can of worms that he didn't need opened right now.

"Shadow magic?" Dewey asked dangerously, eyes narrowing. José looked back calmly.

"I am aware of Magica de Spell's preference," José said, "But rest assured, using shadow magic does not mean I am like her in any way."

"How would *we* know? This is the first time we've ever heard any of this!" Dewey snapped, standing to lean into José's face.

"Dewey," Donald warned.

"What? It's true! We don't know him *or* Panchito at all, and now he does the same kind of magic stuff that Magica does?!"

“ *Dewey.”*

“He has a point Unca Donald,” Louie insisted, “We’re kinda in the dark here.”

“It wasn’t my secret to tell,” Donald replied forcefully, before he took a sharp breath and focused on finishing the hot chocolates, adding cinnamon and a bit of chili pepper to his own.

“We did not plan on things remaining secret forever, it simply hadn’t come up in our few meetings thus far,” José added. “Your tío is very particular about not betraying confidences, even if I would not have minded you knowing before.”

“Especially about magic,” Donald grumbled, handing out drinks.

“Wait, why magic specifically?” Dewey asked. Huey frowned, clearly thinking, but it was Louie that replied.

“Is this cause of the Phantom Blot?” He asked. Donald sighed, taking a seat, and Panchito took the last one with a small creak of wood.

“Yes,” he answered tiredly, “it is. Nobody who knew any magic was safe for a very long time. You boys have to understand, we didn’t know who he was when he was out the first time, or even what he was doing. Only that people were disappearing left and right. And even after he went to prison, it was scary, because we were never completely sure he didn’t have help. So I don’t like to talk about magic with anyone, even if I trust them; you never knew who might be listening.”

Louie winced, leaning back and clutching his drink with both hands. Huey, however, leaned forward.

“Out the first time?” He asked.

Phooey.

“He… this is a secret,” Donald warned, eyeing each of his boys until they nodded. “The Phantom Blot escaped prison. PK and the other heroes are trying to find him, but right now he’s nowhere to be found.”

And despite the volume of people looking, he had yet to be spotted even once. The man might as well be a ghost.

Pressure Gages

Chapter Notes

> Early chapter! No idea if I'll have access to my computer this weekend, so I'm posting early while I still have access :) Wish this was a bit more thematic for the winter solstice, but what can you do?
>
> Enjoy!

Donald braced himself for shouting, but was surprised by thoughtful silence. He looked at each of the boys, but they all seemed less than shocked. More like they'd solved a puzzle, which was baffling, even if his ears were grateful for the quiet.

"Is that why you've been so stressed lately?" Louie asked.

"This is why Paperinik came out of retirement!" Dewey proclaimed before Donald could do more than nod.

"That explains a lot, actually," Huey said to himself, jotting down notes. "I looked into Morgana Macawber a while ago and apparently she runs a magic shop. I couldn't figure out why you said she was a coworker."

"We were meeting so I could let her know what happened," Donald explained, "I worked with her after the Blot was arrested to try and help the victims." For all the good it had done them, he thought.

"Ohhh, yeah, that makes sense," Dewey said to himself, nodding. "You didn't want to tell us she was magic either."

“So when you’re being super vague and mysterious, it’s cause you’re keeping secrets for other people?” Louie mumbled into his cocoa. Donald made a wiggly hand motion.

“Mostly, yes, but sometimes it’s for personal reasons,” he admitted. He glanced back at Panchito, then at the egg.

“Back on subject, though…” he said, and carefully lifted the egg onto the table. Panchito slid the strap over his head, and opened the bag so it was nestled in the fabric, glowing faintly.

The boys eyed it suspiciously, shrinking back. Donald rested a light hand on it. He didn’t feel any pushback this time, just warmth. Must be sleeping, he thought, still a bit giddy at the whole idea. José reached out to shift the bag, so more of the egg was exposed, hands brushing against the shell as he did. He looked entranced, fingers lingering.

“Say hello,” he whispered encouragingly, “They’re going to be your cousin.”

Louie scowled at that, while Dewey looked betrayed.

“It almost killed you, and now it’s gonna be our *cousin?!* What, does it get our room too?” Louie snarked, leaning even further back. Donald sighed.

“It’s just a baby,” he insisted, but as softly as he could. It was a lot to take in, and smart as they were, his boys were still just kids.

“And why cousin? You’re basically our dad, that makes us siblings,”

Dewey added, looking genuinely offended.

Donald blinked. Blinked again.

“Uh….”

Huey nodded, and even Louie looked like he agreed, and what was happening?

“I’m your uncle?” Donald said, looking between José and Panchito for help, but they both looked amused.

Traitors.

“You raised us, you’re raising some new baby fire monster, we’re siblings!” Dewey proclaimed.

“They’re not a *monster,”* Donald protested, because that part he could handle. Dewey huffed.

“Still a sibling,” he repeated. “And what is it gonna be, then?”

“We do not know!” Panchito announced happily. “All we were told is they will be some kind of bird.”

“But is it gonna be a chicken, like you? Or a parrot?” Huey asked eagerly, leaning forward again. He reached out, as though to touch the shell, but stopped, beak twisting.

“I think it will be a chicken just like me!” Panchito declared. “Your tio thinks they will be a firebird, because a flammable baby will be most tricky to raise.”

“Personally, I think Donald is correct,” José offered, “At the very least, they are likely to be a magical creature of some kind.”

“It will be an adventure!” Panchito insisted, grinning at them all, and Dewey tentatively smiled back.

Huey reached out again, hand landing on the eggshell like it was going to bite him. The other boys grew still, watching.

“It’s warm,” Huey noted, head tilting to one side. “Are all eggs like that?”

“This one is a bit warmer than usual, but yes,” Donald answered, a fond smile breaking across his face.

“It feels like there’s something inside,” Huey continued, then paused. “I mean, obviously there’s something, but under my hand here.” He shrugged with the arm still touching the egg, but didn’t move his hands. His eyes were big and staring.

Dewey reached out as well, less hesitant, both hands landing next to Huey’s. His expression, one of grim determination, faded to wonder.

“Oh…”

“So are you guys moving in together now?” Louie asked, staring down at his empty hot chocolate mug. José glanced at Donald.

Donald considered, then nodded. Best they know now.

“We have solved that little problem, but none of us are moving,” José told them all, and stood to lead the way back to the closet door.

“Um, I think it’s a bit late to make ‘in the closet’ jokes, Unca Donald,” Dewey offered with a grin. Donald laughed, shaking his head.

José opened the door, this time walking inside to turn on the lights. Donald winced, his cabana room still had band posters up from college, but the boys clustered at the doorway with fascination.

“You… have a pocket dimension in the closet?! Since when?!” Huey asked, peering around. Dewey jumped through, immediately staggering at the change, but popped back up to dart to the bedroom door.

“There’s a whole house in here!” He shouted, and there was a distant grumble from Humphrey somewhere else in the cabana.

“We connected our houses with a kind of portal, this building is still in New Quackmore,” Donald answered. “Well, José and Panchito did, I found out just before you came in.”

Which led them directly where Donald really *didn’t* want to be; trying to explain how the Goblin Town magic situation had happened while

not explaining Goblin Town. Xandra's rule still held, after all; only involve people that absolutely needed to be in Caballero business.

Granted, they *had* defeated Felldrake years ago, and there had been no signs that another threat was coming from that direction. But Xandra had made them swear by it, so unless she was here to release him from that oath, there they were.

Surprisingly, the boys were willing to accept José's explanation of 'a friend from another realm assisted in setting it up' without any follow up questions. Donald suspected they were overwhelmed at this point, but he'd take it.

They were less pleased to not get an immediate tour of the cabana, but Donald was firm on that point.

"Your mom is going to break down my door if we wait too much longer, and I *don't* want her coming through here right this second. We can do a full tour of New Quackmore later."

"Can we go tomorrow?" Huey asked, which seemed to be missing the point entirely to Donald, but Panchito was enthusiastically agreeing already.

"Yes, there is an open house on the campus! We can visit where we used to go to school while you are here!"

Well. At least everyone agreed to wait *one* day. He'd have to take it.

"Can we invite Violet? She said she wants to tour New Quackmore, and well, they're right outside…" Huey asked, and that brought them

back to the situation at hand.

Donald closed the door. Took a steadying breath. Knelt down to look each of them in the eyes.

“I’m sorry that we’re springing all of this on you,” he said clearly. “Things came up faster than expected, and I wish we had time to get comfortable with them, but we really don’t. Do you have any questions right now?”

Louie scowled.

“Are you gonna actually answer them? Cause half of the stuff we’ve asked, you just say you can’t talk about it,” he grumbled, and Donald sighed.

“What do you still want me to answer? I swear, I’m telling you everything I can,” Donald said, but he didn’t think they really believed him.

“How do *you* know magic stuff? Cause Uncle Scrooge slipped up earlier and said you did, then said you didn’t. And then he wouldn’t say anything,” Dewey asked, crossing his arms.

Great start, that one. Donald had to commend his boys for catching every bit he didn’t want to tell. But he had *just* said…

He chewed over his answer, feeling overly raw and exposed again.

“I didn’t have a teacher, I just learned from whatever we had around,” Donald answered carefully, thinking over his words one at a time. “Some books, chatting with José, things like that. And Scrooge wasn’t lying, I *can’t* do magic. Not the way that Magica or José can.”

He thought it over again, debating. He didn’t want to say this, he *really* didn’t, but the choice seemed to be between his own comfort and his boys’ peace of mind.

It wasn’t a choice, not really.

“I was injured, by the Phantom Blot. Back when he was out the first time. I wasn’t as badly hurt as some others, because I hadn’t had any kind of magic training, but I *can’t* do anything now,” Donald said to the wall, because he didn’t want to look anyone in the eye. “Not the way a warlock or wizard does. I told Scrooge that earlier, I think he was trying to keep it private.”

Fat lot of good *that* had done him. Could Scrooge really not keep *one* little secret?

The boys were silent. Over their shoulders, José and Panchito were both looking at him with big, sad eyes. While Donald thought they had probably known for a long time, it wouldn’t have been that hard to guess, he had never said anything directly, had never said it out loud before today in fact.

Louie’s beak twisted, like he was fighting back some reaction, before his face smoothed over again, nodding seriously.

“... did it hurt?” He asked, nearly a whisper. Donald let out a breath, not quite a sigh.

“At the time, it did. Not anymore though,” he replied.

He wished he didn’t have to say it, but they were old enough to hear the truth. Some of it, at least, and he doubted they would appreciate him softening the blow much more.

That answer seemed to cut off any interest in asking more questions; Louie in particular refused to meet Donald’s eyes, and there was just too *much* to handle. He couldn’t push, he kept repeating to himself, if he pushed they would all shut down.

They insisted on going back out first, to ‘give them a minute alone,’ which he assumed was code for ‘debrief without being listened to,’ but he was just happy to get said minute.

They sat back at the table.

“I have to go back out there at some point, don’t I?” Donald asked the table, which he had pressed his face into. He could just feel the edge of the makeshift nest on his eyebrows.

“Sim, yes, we all do,” José agreed, sounding less than enthused. “Do you think that the boys will explain for us, before we go back outside?”

“That didn’t work so well today; I think I would have been better off just letting everyone interrogate me this morning instead of Scrooge’s idea,” Donald grumbled. “At least I wouldn’t have had to repeat everything three times.”

“Or correct things,” Panchito added helpfully. Donald made a vague wave in his direction to concede the point.

“Yeah, that too.”

“We could flee through the door,” José offered.

“Or sail away on the high seas,” Panchito added dreamily. Donald made a negative noise in the back of his throat.

“They know about the door,” he pointed out. “And we have jobs now, we’d have to come back at some point.”

They all sighed at once.

“I miss being a worthless layabout,” Panchito said wistfully. “There were fewer responsibilities back then.”

“We were flint broke most of the time,” Donald reminded him.

“That was part of the fun! Do you remember when we did that show on a street corner to get gas?”

“And got chased off by the cops?” José added, leaning forward.

“I remember getting away because some *street urchins* led us to their hideout,” Donald muttered, but he was fighting a smile.

“We thought you were about to adopt them all,” Panchito grinned at him. Donald let out a grumble, but he couldn’t argue the point that much.

“They turned out to be changelings, they were probably older than we were,” he said instead of protesting.

“I don’t see why that would stop you?”

A moment of laughter. A longer one of silence.

“The original gemstone, I think it was made as a prison,” Donald said finally. “Not sure how old they were when they were trapped, but they felt… young, I think. Might explain why they reverted to an egg.”

“And… the fire?” José asked quietly.

“It was blasting everyone. Or, trying to. Dewey got pinned, and I… well, you can guess. Felt like it was trying to claw its way through me to escape. And I couldn’t- we needed to get close enough for me to get hold of you.”

God, it had been so many *hours* of burning and praying Scrooge didn’t decide to go back to the Viking village anyway. If he had to try and fight the fire, while dealing with the ice?

No. He couldn’t deal with both. Just *one* had almost killed him.

“Scrooge wanted to go to the desert and try to use their ice spell,” Donald revealed, getting everything out in the open. He couldn’t even count how many secrets he’d revealed today, yesterday, god it felt like the last 48 hours had lasted for *weeks.*

“Does he not know-” José began to snarl, eyes glowing with abrupt emotion. He’d had to help peel that spell off of Donald, when it latched onto his skin and kept him literally frosting over for hours after the outer ice had melted off.

“No.” Donald snapped, temper only a hair away from snapping itself. “As far as he was concerned I was fine, and being a big baby about the whole thing. He *might* think it was dangerous now, because Webby said something about it, but that was on the flight.”

The terror at *that* suggestion, at the idea that he might have to try and handle both things trying to kill him at the *same time,* that the kids might have to *watch-*

That José and Panchito were still so far away, the only two people he thought could actually help…

“You almost went to the hospital! You were *covered in ice,* how did he not notice?! How did *Della* not see something?!” José exploded, and it was shocking that he was so angry, so *loud.*

Snap.

“ *I. Don’t. Know!* I tell him something hurt, he says I’m exaggerating! I say something is dangerous, he jumps in faster and calls me a coward! I have *no idea* why Scrooge thinks I’m the most incompetent person he’s ever met, but he does! Nothing I say is trustworthy! Or worth listening to!” Donald *screamed,* every pent up feeling bursting out like

a tidal wave, and he hated this, he *hated* how easy it was for him to lose control, at people he wasn't even *mad* at, but once the floodgates had opened he couldn't *stop.*

"I even tried to tell him something was weird about this temple, but he brushed me off! He just laughs when I get hurt and ignores me when I try to stop everyone from *getting* hurt, and god, he had the sheer *gall* to suggest that village like *he wasn't the person that threw me into that freezer in the first place!"*

"Donal'," Panchito tried, eyes elsewhere, but nope, Donald wasn't even looking in that direction. *Let* Scrooge overhear him, maybe it would actually sink in this time! It never had before, but who knew? Certainly not Donald!

"He *threw me in,* had no idea what would happen, laughed it off afterwards, and he didn't even have a good reason! I WAS TRYING! He'd all but *begged* me to go on a new adventure, kept complaining I was too busy with college, and when I finally went he spent the whole time complaining I was there! Too slow, too stupid, hey why don't you jump into this magical freezer, you're about as useful as the sheep they're throwing in anyway!"

José had taken a small step back, not in fear but clearly giving Donald room to pace, because if he couldn't move he was going to start breaking things, and there was an *egg* here, he couldn't risk breaking anything while going blind with rage.

"And he *still* complains that I never go with them, nevermind I have a job that I can't just *jet off* whenever I want because that's not how things work if you're not a *billionaire,* no it's my fault anyway that I can't magically make time whenever it's convenient to *him!"*

His breath was ragged. His fists hurt where he was clenching them, he

could barely see through the red in his vision, and he just wanted to *scream* but there were no more words. Just mindless shouting that always left his throat sore but felt so *good* in the moment.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't go back out there and make nice, couldn't try and give everyone the exciting *good* news when he just wanted to let his rage burn, burn and burn until he was nothing but ash.

And yet, it felt so *stupid,* they'd been getting along fine today, Scrooge was *trying* , but one errant comment and Donald's rage roared back in, latching onto how uncomfortable and angry he was in general and feeding it into the fire. It really wasn't fair, he should be able to focus his anger by now, he should be *better than this,* but Donald wasn't. He wasn't better, he barely had a handle on his temper even after all these years.

Funny that he couldn't, wouldn't, have it out with Scrooge, because it always ended badly for him, but then he held it all in, pushed it down and down and down, until there was no more room and it had to come out. Leaving him *still* exhausted and aching and feeling no better. Somehow Donald lost whether he fought or not.

"This is ridiculous," Donald grumbled, panting. "Scrooge hasn't even *done* anything today. It's not like he knew what happened."

"Had he been listening the last many years, he would have known not to suggest it at all," José told him. "You can still be hurt by his past actions, Donald, even if there was nothing meant by what he offered yesterday."

And that, hearing someone give him that permission to be angry, to *still* be angry even a decade later, strangely made him calmer.

He let his breath out in a slow hiss, allowed his sore body to slump. Reveled, just a bit, in the fact that he wasn't bleeding or surrounded by the shredded remains of his living room.

It wasn't like he'd told Scrooge or Della about the fallout of that adventure. He'd complained the entire time he was thawing out, naturally, because it was easier to channel his fear into anger, but it had only been when the ice block was gone and Donald still couldn't get *warm,* had seen new frost gathering on the edges of his feathers and ice along his toes, that he'd truly realized how much danger he was in. And he'd left for the cabana.

José smiled when he realized Donald was coming down, stepping forward to gently patting him on the shoulder. Sometimes, he was able to calm Donald back down, his usually placid demeanor tempering Donald's own black temper. Other times, though, he seemed aware that it wasn't the time to step in. Knew when to back away and just let him go, because trying to calm him down would just make it worse.

This might be the first time it had been *José* that had lost his temper first; even in their darker moments, he was more prone to melancholy than anger. Even Panchito was more likely to get properly angry than José was. But his face was still flushed and even if he looked calmer than Donald felt, he didn't seem fully composed yet.

It was probably just as well that Panchito took the opportunity to open the door to the upper decks, and Della tumbled through it like a naughty toddler.

Donald took one brief moment to just stare into the ceiling, praying for patience, before he turned to his sheepish sister, asking himself what else could possibly happen.

Reflections in a Funhouse Mirror

Della looked chagrined at least, Donald thought wildly. She might be nosy and had no sense of boundaries as usual, but at least right this second she seemed to realize she's gone too far. Or she just felt awkward about being caught.

"Heh. Sorry about that. Um, Don, can we talk?" She said, nowhere near her usual level of confidence. Which was good, Donald was nowhere near his usual level of composure (which was already low to begin with).

"Doesn't seem like anyone's giving me a choice, today," Donald grumbled, crossing his arms. Della let out an awkward laugh, rubbing her arm, glancing between the three of them. Her eyes landed briefly on the egg and caught, before she looked back at Donald.

"I mean a private talk," she said, like it wasn't obvious what she wanted. Donald tilted his head to the side.

"Really?" He drawled, dragging the word out as long as he could. "Interesting idea. Privacy."

She blinked at him, before wincing. Had she *just* realized what she was doing, or did she think that he wouldn't mind the interruption, coming from her?

So much of their relationship was like that; Della did what she wanted, whenever she wanted, and just dragged Donald along for the ride. She never seemed to notice, or maybe she just didn't care, what he might want to do instead. Donald wants privacy? Eh, no need, Della wanted to hear this. *Della* wants privacy? Kick everyone out!

“You can say it to everyone, or you can leave it be; I’m tired, I want my partners with me, and I’m not sending them out to face the gauntlet with Scrooge alone,” Donald declared, leaning back against the wall.

Which seemed to stump her entirely. José and Panchito moved to sit at the table again, maybe to at least visually get out of the way, or maybe to check on the egg again; Donald wanted to do so too, but he kept up his staring contest with his sister.

Della huffed, and tossed her head, and tapped her foot. Donald waited, unimpressed. Did she think he was going to give in just because? He didn’t want to have this conversation anyway, he could wait until the heat death of the universe.

“Fine, fine, whatever, I get it. Just… can you *please* explain what you’re doing?! A week ago you were bor- normal Don, and now you’re some trained wizard guy who has magic friends, and you’re having a baby? I don’t get it, what’s going on with you?”

Wasn’t that a loaded question.

“I don’t know if you noticed,” he started icily, “but I just found out we’re having a baby. I would have been excited to share that news on my own time, but looks like I don’t get to do that. Becoming a bit of a pattern.”

“You’ve been acting so *weird,* you can’t expect us not to be curious-”

“Dewey gave me the same argument and I didn’t let it fly then, either. *Your* curiosity isn’t more important than my privacy!” Donald

snapped. Della huffed, shaking her head.

“Don’t put words in my mouth, I’m just saying you aren’t exactly clearing things up!” She retorted.

“I *literally* just found out about this-”

“And your so-called friend, that apparently mysteriously saved your ass and rescued the magic spell that was *also* a magic fire baby? Then vanished without anyone seeing them? Cause I’m pretty sure none of that was something you found out about yesterday!”

“That friend was actually us,” José called from the kitchen, fussing over the make-shift nest on the table. “We were not physically here, hence not being seen. And Donald prefers to keep others’ secrets even when it inconveniences him, so he did not mention it previously.”

“And technically, the rest of it did happen yesterday,” Panchito added pleasantly.

Della paused mid-tirade, looking over at him with a frown.

“Oh,” she said. “I guess… yeah, that makes sense.” She seemed to have lost steam, wobbling on her feet like she wanted to pace but didn’t know what direction.

Donald had an idea of what she really wanted to say. Della was asking why he wasn’t being boring old Donald anymore, but what she wanted to know was how long he’d been doing interesting things behind her back, so to speak. Why hadn’t he told her about his magic friends, why hadn’t he talked about magic training, or dating José and

Panchito, or the Blot, and so on and so on.

Della had always thought of them as as close as people could be, twins born from the same egg. Always together, always on the same wavelength, never needing to even speak to understand each other. And in some ways, she was right, they could read each other well and tended to know what the other was thinking without words. They *could* read each other easily, when they were trying. When they were close.

But they hadn't been that close in years; Donald could point cleanly at Paperinik as the first major secret that he'd kept, but there had been a decline before that. Sneaking out to hang with Mickey and Goofy instead of going sasquatch hunting. Blaring music from his room so he could go out as PK or just to wander to the pier, coming back to find Della and Scrooge had given up on talking to him and gone off on a new adventure without even opening his door.

Della clearly hadn't noticed it all, or ignored it if she did, concluding that her lack of knowledge was because there was nothing there to see. Donald just didn't do anything interesting, that was all. Now she was here, standing in his boat trying to find something to pick at, because she didn't like that she was wrong.

"But… a baby?" She finally tried, her earlier anger flickering. Donald shrugged.

"Magic is weird," he offered blandly, startling a laugh out of her.

"Alright, yeah. And you just, what, studied all sorts of magic stuff when you can't even use it? Why?" She demanded; she sounded like a whining child.

‘ *Give me something, Donald, I want the high ground back!* ’

“I studied languages too,” he replied. “I thought it was interesting. And I could use it, if I have a power source. I just can’t create it.”

Create wasn’t quite accurate; most warlocks and witches described it as bringing raw material into themselves to forge into a spell. A pile of loose fibers becoming fabric, a bag of flour into bread.

Della’s face spasmed into a scowl on reflex, probably at the mention of magic. Ah, his family.

“And never mentioned it?”

“It wasn’t something I liked talking about Della!” Donald snapped, feeling his temper rising again, but shockingly she backed down, waving a hand as though to wipe away her previous statement.

“Fine, alright, you have a magic friend, who you’re dating now, and having a baby with. And Panchito,” she added, gesturing to the rooster in question, who waved back. “You studied magic for funsies, didn’t tell anyone cause of hero stuff, whatever. And you happened to have a ‘finding people’ spell ready to go to give Magica because of... well, that… that makes sense.”

She hesitated, then stepped closer to him, twisting her shoulders to try and herd him towards the living room. He allowed it, nonplussed.

“Are you okay? Cause this is a lot,” she asked quietly, glancing back at the kitchen and lowering her voice even more. “Especially after the whole Old Man McMoney thing. Just- you sure you’re doing good?”

Donald blinked, then sighed, tugging Della into a one-armed hug. She froze for a second, then reached around to hug him back properly.

“I’ll be fine, I just need a bit of time to process,” he said into her hair. She still smelled like smoke and ash, and he reminded himself that even though he was the one in danger, the others had had to watch.

“And can you just… forget whatever you overheard?” He added; he didn’t want her to try and step in or god forbid, talk to Scrooge. Much as he’d thought he would love Scrooge to hear him in the moment, he didn’t really once his anger had cooled off.

“I didn’t hear anything, I swear! Just muffled voices,” she insisted immediately. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have been so close to the door!”

What? *How?* Donald hadn’t exactly been quiet!

He glanced at the kitchen, where Panchito caught his eye and shrugged. He made a vague gesture between the window that he'd initially seen movement in, and the door Della had tumbled through, and shrugged again.

Maybe she couldn’t tell what he was saying through the walls…? His voice wasn't easy to understand at the best of times, let alone when he got going into a rage.

“So… you ready to tell Scrooge he’s gonna be a granduncle again? Cause I was at ground zero for the first time, and I do *not* envy you. Guy is gonna be so overprotective, he’ll make you look like a latch-key parent,” Della giggled into his ear, and Donald felt himself go pale.

“Wanna cover for me while I untie the boat? I think I could get to San Diego by tomorrow with a good headwind,” he begged, and she kept giggling, gripping him tighter. “Seriously, I’ll bribe you. You want money? Baby photos of the boys?”

“Mm, tempting, but nerp! Gotta face the music, come on!” And she tugged him back out of the boat into the sunshine. He let out a squawk, flailing, and heard laughter behind him.

Out on the beach, Donald found Bentina apparently guarding Scrooge, keeping him where he was while he shouted and tried to dart around her. Off to the side, the kids were all clustered, probably a concern for later, and LP, Gladstone, Drake and Indy sitting far into the shade, speaking quietly. Donald stifled a snort at Gladstone’s expression, clearly feeling awkward but unable to escape the conversation, before Della pulled him forward.

“Guess who’s gonna be a dad!” She shouted, holding Donald’s arm up in the air. Donald shook his head ruefully, but waved.

Behind him, a shout.

“All three of us!” Panchito crowed, and finally, it seemed the full reality sunk in. They were going to have a *baby,* a tiny little baby, the three of them were going to be parents-!

They would have to tell Xandra and Ari and Humphrey and the girls, and Daisy would *kill* him if she found out from his nieces, and oh, he should get some of the paperwork to get them registered as a citizen done early, nice to have some warning for *once* (thanks Mickey) and-

Scrooge turned to face them, a rabid look in his eyes. Bentina glanced at them, looking at Donald for a moment longer, before she stepped to the side. Traitor.

Scrooge moved so fast he left a dust trail, and Della hopped further away with a laugh, he was going to kill her later.

Impact in three… two…

Scrooge's arms wrapped around him tight enough to force the air from his lungs with a gasping huff, nearly toppling them both over from the impact. His spine throbbed with the movement.

"You are *never* doing that again," Scrooge growled in his ear.

Which. Made no sense.

"Never doing *what* again?"

"Nearly dying, for starters! Disappearing for hours, showing up with Magica de Spell! And you are telling me everything next time, what in blazes did the boys mean, you're having a *baby?!"*

José thankfully gave the explanation for this, while Scrooge twisted to stare daggers at the parrot, still clinging to Donald like a teddy bear.

Donald felt like he was losing his mind, personally, so he really appreciated someone else talking for a minute. Scrooge's grip was frantic, his shoulders were shaking, and his uncle had been *calm*

earlier, if a bit anxious, what was happening?! Sure, *he* had been in a rage a few minutes ago and wasn't anymore, but that was different, Scrooge hadn't *done* anything to really trigger it, Donald had just needed to let off some pressure and Scrooge was an easy target-

Della caught his eye, and mimed rocking a baby before making a wide gesture at where Scrooge seemed to be trying to merge them together.

Ah. Well, good to know his family was already seeing the egg as family already.

Scrooge was now interrogating Panchito about his job, would he be able to watch the egg when José and Donald were at work, did they already have a nursery built, he could probably find some furniture in storage-

The boys must have mentioned the doorway, because that was brought up too- is it stable, can the egg go through safely, he'd better get to see the nursery on that side, really did they need anything, he was certain he had a bassinet laying around, hardly fair to let it be wasted if there was going to be a new baby after all!

It dawned on Donald, as he met Della's widening eyes, that any furniture or decorations for a nursery Scrooge had 'lying around' had to have been intended for the boys. The boys that he had never seen hatch, or grow up; a nursery that would only have gathered dust and regrets.

He was going to have to accept, wasn't he? He hadn't kept the crib from the boys anyway.

To agree though, he would have to get some breath into his lungs.

Scrooge seemed determined not to release him though, and Donald found himself… unwilling to fight him too much. Just this time; no, he wasn't relishing the first real, solid hug from Scrooge he'd gotten in years.

"Wait!" Della shouted, interrupting whatever Scrooge was saying; the older duck swung around to look at Della, Donald craning his neck to do the same. Della's face was slack, eyes wide.

"Does that mean I'm gonna be an *aunt?!*"

Oh good grief.

Finally, finally, they got seated back at the beach, Donald squished between Panchito and Scrooge, José just on the other side. Their egg nestled in Panchito's lap. The kids, all of them, were sitting in a pile in front of them, asking questions.

Their questions were more like how long would it be until they hatched, did they know what gender/species/color they would be, could they come, could they watch, what would they do if it was a firebird after all- and so on. Donald let Panchito take most of the questions, José piping up when needed, and let himself doze off, leaning against Scrooge's shoulder.

Scrooge wasn't moving as much. That was it.

Scrooge wanted to see the nursery setup. He actually wanted to see their whole house, confirm it was already baby-proof and 'safe for a little bairn!' Della insisted they should all go, and the kids had been promised a tour, and Donald just gave in and said they should make it

a full family trip.

" *Tomorrow,"* he insisted. "We can do a full tour of New Quackmore *tomorrow."* All he'd done today was talk and talk and talk, but he was so *tired.*

Drake offered to come along to help chaperone ("Gos can be pretty rambunctious!" He insisted, but his face was twitchy at the idea of her being away from him for so long), and Indy begged off but let Violet and Lena stay to come along, so it was a big group. Donald was grateful he was leaving, it was… strange to have so many people around for what would have otherwise been a private moment. Drake and LP were chatting off to the side, LP fully turned away so it at least felt a bit private, but it still felt odd making the announcement to such a crowd.

Gladstone, at least, found humor in the whole thing; he had taken to giggling every few minutes, muttering 'egg' under his breath like it was the funniest joke he'd ever heard. Bentina was placidly nodding to whatever suggestions Scrooge made for furniture to be moved, but it wasn't clear if she was agreeing or placating his manic energy.

"That is quite the group to bring along to the campus," José whispered under his breath.

"At least we don't have to find a car big enough for everyone," Donald muttered; Panchito chuckled.

"Yes, and we will save much on gas!"

"How are you lads getting home? You cannae leave your car here," Scrooge asked, eyes narrowed. He kept glancing at the egg, but didn't reach out to touch it or even ask to do so.

“Well, not forever,” José agreed, “But if it is not in the way, I don’t see why I couldn’t. It makes my commute shorter on Thursday, certainly.”

“Doesn’t bother me any, contractors shouldn’t have any trouble getting around,” Gladstone offered, leaning around to give them a thumbs up. “They’re getting the last walls painted, then I’m having the furniture delivered.”

“Ooh, can we help decorate?” Della piped up, from the center of the kid pile, Webby and Huey nodding eagerly. Gladstone hesitated, beak twisting.

“Eh… sure, I guess,” he replied. Donald eyed him, uncertain if he was genuinely unhappy at the idea or if he just didn’t know how to respond.

“Oh, we can help put away dishes and stuff! It’ll be kinda neat, getting it all set up; you haven’t had your own house!” Della insisted. “We could find some family photos if you want to hang some up!”

Della being interested in home decor was… odd. Maybe she was excited that Gladstone would be living nearby, now that it was all but done. And it wasn’t like she had ever had the chance to decorate a house, maybe the novelty was appealing.

Gladstone looked significantly more interested in the idea of photos.

“I can pull mine out of storage if you want to pick through them,” Donald offered.

“You… do you have any? That you didn’t already hang, I mean,” Gladstone asked awkwardly, rubbing the back of his head. Donald shook his head.

“You know me, I took pictures of everything the boys ever did,” Donald pointed out with a grin. Della perked up.

“You have *more* baby photos of the boys?” She demanded, leaning forward, and he really should have offered as soon as she got back, shouldn’t he?

He glanced at Scrooge out of the corner of his eye. Maybe earlier.

“Tons. Probably too many, you’ll get bored,” he warned; Della scoffed.

“Never!” She declared, gathering the pile of kids around her in a multi-limbed hug. She ended up catching Webby and Lena in the mass, but didn’t seem remotely bothered.

“I’ll grab them next time I’m in town,” he promised, figuring he’d just drag Scrooge into it whether he liked it or not. Or more accurately, no matter how much Scrooge insisted he didn’t care, because he would, he did, but wasn’t always willing to admit it. Like it was a weakness to admit he loved his family in any way.

“Is it just baby photos?” Huey asked, peering up at him curiously.

“Nope, I ended up with all of Grandma Duck’s scrapbooks when she passed, so these go back to my parents,” Donald told him, feeling warmed at the idea of having a night of reminiscing with everyone. There were photos of their whole family in those boxes, old home

movies; it would make a good night.

“Ooh, can we all look?” Webby demanded, twisting to look at him with bright interest. “I want to see the family photos!”

Scrooge, under Donald’s head, perked up. He still said nothing, but Donald had to suppress a wince regardless. He really should have pulled them out months ago. As soon as he had reached back to Scrooge in the first place. As soon as Della had returned to the Earth.

“Sure. I’ll have to get them out of storage first,” Donald promised, because he could at least fix this now.

“You don’t keep them in the houseboat?” Indy asked curiously. Donald stifled a snort, and saw his boys and Bentina guiltily look away.

“The boat’s sunk a few times, we don’t keep that kind of thing on board unless there’s a copy somewhere else, just in case,” he explained; Drake, rejoining their group, nodded seriously.

“I have the same issue with my Darkwing collectibles,” he said, leaning against Launchpad, “Hard to keep them safe without locking them all up. We had a pop bottle erupt and blast the whole living room last week!”

“There was a very serious incident involving spaghetti sauce at the cabana while we were in college; nearly destroyed Donald’s final thesis!” Panchito added, waving one arm in emphasis. “I think the stains are still there!”

“No, we had to repaint after the Samba Incident,” Donald retorted while letting his eyes slide shut again.

“Ah yes, that was an interesting afternoon,” José nodded, hands tapping a gentle rhythm against his thighs.

“Wait, what’s the-” Dewey started.

“So can we see you do a magic trick?” Louie interrupted loudly, looking at José with interest. Dewey scowled, but Huey made some complicated face, and Webby leaned in to whisper in his ear, and he softened, saying nothing.

Strange, Donald thought, and could see Bentina noticing as well.

José looked delighted at the idea, and hopped up to start his performance.

When asked to do magic, José usually leaned into his family’s traditional methods; shadows and smoke, half a spell and half a show. He only reached to Air, his elemental preference courtesy of Donald’s own methods, when he needed it.

This time was no different; his smoke swirled green and glowing around him as he produced a light show to the amusement of the kids, each leaning in to watch with interest. It was no more than a basic magician’s demonstration, but they so rarely got to see magic used for fun instead of danger.

He let his eyes drift shut again, feeling the gentle bursts of José’s magic against his senses, like waves on the beach.

No, wait, those were the actual waves- Donald, and the rest of the group, jumped up, rushing to move the furniture as the tide returned and tried to wash them all away.

Through it all, he couldn't help but laugh. The water felt comforting as it brushed sand and salt over his toes. Even before he'd started learning magic, long before it became second nature to let it curl around his hands, the ocean had always felt like home to him. Now it was a heady thing, slowly taking away the tension of the day and leaving him shockingly content.

Bentina took that moment to announce that they should make their way back to the Manor, as she needed to prepare dinner for everyone. Indy confirmed that the girls were fine, then decided to head out, as he had work in the morning and wanted to get home early.

Donald realized in that moment that he was *starving,* so was more than happy to help corral the kids up to the Manor, trailed by José. Panchito was a few steps away, catching up with Drake about the last football match, Drake's eyes trailing down to the egg with slight wonder as they talked.

Despite everything, it didn't feel quite real, yet, that there was going to be a new baby soon. That the slightly glowing thing in the satchel would be a new life soon, a tiny feathered thing with needs and wants. It was exciting.

It was *terrifying.* He could only imagine how the others felt, he at least had some experience with hatchlings. It was different, helping family versus raising your own children. But he doubted this would even remotely compare to the boys. No two eggs were quite the same; the triplets had been unique from the moment they were born.

A brand new adventure. For once, Donald couldn't wait to start it.

Though if Scrooge had anything to do with it, Donald would be taking a backseat on this one. He could hear him now insisting that they ought to just move in to the Manor, wouldn't that be more convenient?

Della caught his eye and mouthed 'over protective' at him with a grin. Despite himself, he laughed; yes, Scrooge was already a pain in his tail feathers, but he barely minded. There were worse things.

It wouldn't last. It never did. But at least right this second, he felt like he could breathe.

Memory Lane

Come next morning, Donald regretted the whole idea. The tour, the trip, everything. He was still exhausted, they had eight curious children to corral, and he had his sister and uncle to contend with on top of that. They could still make it down the coast in the boat faster than Scrooge could chase them down in the limo!

But he'd been outvoted handily on that, so after a hasty breakfast of cereal, their enormous group trooped one by one through the door into the cabana; Scrooge eyeing the doorway warily as he went. Gladstone had opted out, saying a tour sounded too much like work, and he had lots of laying around on the beach to catch up on. Bentina had the opposite reasoning, saying she had plenty to do, and would have to visit another time, so the mob from yesterday was whittled down slightly to fourteen.

Still a lot of people to shuffle through first the houseboat, then his cabana bedroom.

Donald felt a bit embarrassed that the very first thing people were seeing was his old bedroom of all things, but he shook it off. The room had little left in it anyway, besides dust and a few faded posters. Beyond it, the dark hallway, open doors leading to José and Panchito's rooms, and the new nursery at the end.

The walls were still the pale lavender they'd been when the girls lived there, but instead of the three beds (a bunk bed and a single) that had once sat inside, it only had a brooding chair and a dresser.

"We would love to take any nursery furniture off your hands, Senor Scrooge," Panchito offered as they all peered inside. He seemed utterly relaxed, like he hadn't been up half the night with nerves.

“Hmph. What was your first plan?” Scrooge grumbled, eyeing the outlets with a scowl.

“We planned to buy one when we had the chance; our first priority was preparing for hatching the egg, and informing Donald as soon as we were able,” José answered blandly, not taking the obvious bait. “We only knew a few hours before you, that was not yet enough time to get all the necessities.”

“Do you have any idea when it’ll hatch??” Dewey demanded, hopping closer to peer at the egg. It looked the same as it had before, glowing faintly and warm to the touch. But he stared with unbridled curiosity, and it warmed Donald’s heart how fast his boy was to accept the idea.

“Not yet, but our friend indicated we could visit them again in a few weeks, and they will have a better idea,” Panchito explained. “Assuming that they do not hatch in that time!”

A few weeks was not nearly enough time for them to be ready, in Donald’s opinion, but even thinking that had probably jinxed him.

Judging by José’s expression, he agreed.

“I think it’s cute! Are you going to repaint it?” Della insisted, peering into the empty closet like there was something worth seeing there. It had once been full to bursting with matching sweaters and skirts, but now only a stray hair ribbon remained, tied to the door handle. April’s, judging by the color.

“As soon as we have some time, but we will have to hurry. We don’t want it smelling of paint right when they hatch,” José answered, glancing around. There really wasn’t much here to look at, Donald admitted. He left them to it to go upstairs, finding Ari peering down at

them in curiosity.

They'd had to do some work, but they'd managed to build in a stairwell separate from the hidden, lower levels full of Caballero artifacts and treasures. Which was a relief right now, having so many people in the cabana; they'd originally done it so when the girls' mom Donna finally dropped by, she could check the space was safe for her daughters without seeing everything else.

Daisy hadn't understood why they hadn't moved into the Presidential mansion permanently. She never did understand things like that, Donald not being interested in the trappings of wealth. But it had been more of a practical choice, really; the building would go to the university president, and Donald wasn't going to hold that position long. It hadn't been practical to move in, only to move back out after the next election.

He'd taken the time they did have it to find any dangerous artifacts and move them, before calling in contractors to block off the majority of the building and donate it to New Quackmore, artifacts and all, as part of the History and Antiquities department.

They'd wanted to put his name on it. The head of the Archaeology Department had been *particularly* pushy on that point, the debate had taken half the day. He'd insisted they name it after his great grandfather instead, since he was the one that had started everything.

The new president, Eugenia Epitir, had been furious at first at the changes, but had begrudgingly thanked him for the choice. It did benefit the Institute, after all. And the Mansion had been ridiculously large, especially for a single person. It was doing far more good to the student body at large this way.

Ari trilled, jumping into Donald's arms with a delighted chirp. Donald

laughed, nodding to his frantically questioning.

“Yes, of course I’m excited! And yes, you should come to see the boat sometime, and the beach!”

“Donald?” Scrooge asked, emerging from the stairs. He stopped, blinking at Ari in bafflement.

“Scrooge, meet Ari, he’s the caretaker. Ari, this is my uncle Scrooge,” Donald introduced, letting Ari leap over with a yell. Scrooge caught him, while Ari sang a new song and fluffed his feathers, pleased and loud about it.

The rest of the group was coming up the stairs now, Ari bouncing around in one of his signature dances, appearing in the air and sideways in a blink, while Panchito laughed and called out everyone’s names. The noise attracted Humphrey’s attention, and explaining he was a tame, but not domestic, bear took some doing, Donald struggling not to laugh as he did so.

Huey was taking notes so fast Donald doubted he would be able to actually read them come tomorrow, Dewey was dancing with Ari, Webby and Violet were struggling to ask their questions over the chaos, and didn’t seem to know who to direct them at anyway, and look, it had been a long few days. He let himself laugh.

Della was taking everything in stride, joining the dancing duo while Scrooge seemed to have given up and had slipped away from the crowd to look at the bookshelves instead.

LP and Drake hung back, Gosalyn near them, and it was that that reminded Donald that he needed to reign in the chaos. He coughed, loudly, and louder still when that failed to get everyone’s attention.

Finally, Ari stopped singing, and Humphrey flopped to the ground with a tired huff; Webby was clinging to his shoulders and giggled when they hit the ground. She probably would be content hanging out here, Donald had to get them moving before she, Violet or Huey noticed the shelves of books and decided to never leave.

"I think I promised a campus tour too," Donald called out, gesturing at the front door, and finally, their caravan moved outside. Just in time, he figured, the cabana wasn't all that large, and even with just the Cabs and Ari they'd broken their fair share of things.

Everyone meandered out, spilling into the front yard. Looked like someone, probably Panchito, was growing peppers in a few pots on the porch, and someone had rehung Donald's old hammock in the corner.

"Are you growing your own jalapeños ?" Violet asked with interest, eyeing the pots.

"Yes, my own blend! I brought the seeds back north with me when I moved this time!" Panchito explained brightly, arms wrapped around the egg satchel as he hopped down the steps. Ari waved at them, then closed the door as Scrooge exited, slipping back inside.

He squinted around them, then twisted to look at the Mansion behind them.

"Didn't realize you were this close to the Institute," he muttered, looking around them again. Donald scoffed under his breath. He would have had to visit to know where Donald lived, and he'd only ever called to demand Donald come home. For an adventure, for Sunday dinner, to help with whatever laborious task he'd come up

with that time.

Past the yard, into the street, Donald led their group through the Institute grounds, pointing out varying buildings as they walked. This was the Science Hall (‘we nearly blew up the lab once,’ Panchito laughed), there was the dining hall down there, nobody ate there unless they were desperate. That was the only bar near campus, it was always full of drunk undergrads (upperclassmen that were legal to drink went further out). The kids seemed content to follow his lead, not trying to wander off or point them in another direction.

It was disconcerting.

Finally they reached the main courtyard, following the growing crowds flowing in from all sides. There were banners and signs up, student volunteers milling about offering tours and information on various programs.

He was about to ask what buildings they wanted to go into, but he was interrupted by an unexpected voice.

Well. Three voices.

“Uncle Donald~!”

He stepped back. Twisted. Arms out. Three weights landed in them right on queue.

Three cartoonish kisses to the cheek.

“Didya miss us?” Dot asked in a sweet voice, fluttering her eyelashes at him with a smile. He laughed.

“Course I did! What are you three doing here?”

“Yakko wanted to tour the school and see their theater program!” She answered. Wakko, in the middle, nodded cheerfully, while the last sibling in question, Yakko, beamed at him.

“You’re not graduating this year already?” Donald demanded comically, making his eyes go wide.

“Yuup! Free from public school, I will be entering the wide world of expensive private education instead!” Yakko announced, jumping to the ground to gesture grandly and bow. His siblings joined him on the ground with their own dramatic flair.

They were much older than the last time he’d been able to see them. Dot’s fur was longer, slightly curly, and she wore dangling, sparkly earrings now. Wakko still had the same hat, but it nearly fit him, he had to be thirteen by now, and he was also sporting a new earring, a single gold hoop in one ear.

Yakko looked the least changed, still wearing brown slacks and an oversized sweater. But he was taller, more filled out in the jaw. He looked more like his dad than ever before, but that might just be the smug, knowing expression that seemed permanently etched onto his face.

“Uh… Unca Donald?” Louie asked quietly, and Donald turned to face everyone.

“Ah, introductions?” Donald offered, receiving several unamused nods in return.

“I’m Yakko!” Yakko started in immediately, taking the queue before Donald could speak.

“I’m Wakko!”

“And I’m Princess Angelina Countessa Louisa Franchesca Banana Fana Bo Besca III,” Dot finished with a flourish, before smiling indulgently at them all. “But you can call me Dot.”

Nothing but blank looks, though Drake of all people seemed less confused, glancing at Donald instead of at the three black furred children in front of him.

“They’re Bugs and Daffy’s kids,” Donald explained, since the Warners didn’t seem to care to explain further. “Speaking of, kids, where are your dads?”

“Neeeh, what’s up, doc?”

Of course, why had he bothered to ask? He turned to face the rabbit in question, who smirked at him, carrot in hand. No sign of Daffy.

“Bugs,” Donald greeted seriously, before he shook his head with a grin. “What a surprise.”

The rabbit snorted a laugh.

“Can’t convince the kid to go where *I* went to school,” he complained, munching on the carrot as he spoke, “It’s gotta be *New Quackmore,* dadoo, don’t’cha know they’re the only theater school with a decent history program?”

“Think it’s the other way around,” Donald quipped.

“Unca Donald?!” Dewey called out, drawing him back into the conversation at large. The kids were eyeing each other up, Drake looked intrigued, Della and LP confused. Right, Della wasn’t up to date on celebrities yet, and Launchpad had never seemed to really care to keep track if they hadn’t starred in *Darkwing Duck* at some point.

It took a few minutes to finish introductions, with Dewey interrupting to ask about this or that Looney Tune sketch, each of the Warner kids talking over each other to answer before their dad, and so on. Lena clearly got bored of the whole thing and wandered off midway through; Donald kept an eye on her, but let her go. She was a teenager, after all, she could be trusted not to go too far.

“And the egg? You guys finally decide to get serious?” Bugs asked, eyeing the satchel. “Congrats.”

Donald felt his beak split into a grimace at the reminder of how they’d gotten back together, and the drama immediately afterwards. No doubt Bugs had responded in the initial chaos, but for the life of him Donald couldn’t recall for sure.

“We only found out yesterday,” Panchito explained, hands splayed at his sides.

“Please keep it quiet, we haven’t had a chance to tell people yet,” Donald added. Bugs eyed him, then nodded, very serious. He at least would understand the loss of privacy and how hard it was to keep secrets with people watching your every move. Already Donald was glancing around the crowd, trying to see if anyone was looking at them too closely, had anyone caught a glimpse of what Panchito was carrying?

Having Bugs around wouldn’t be too good for anonymity, but on the other hand, he might keep anyone from looking at Donald’s group. Actual celebrity should win over random viral guy, right?

“But… you guys were all friends in college? Seriously?” Louie asked. “How did you even meet?”

“Well, ya see-”

“Can we talk on the tour? I want to see the theater department!” Yakko interrupted, gesturing to the gathering crowd under a sign proclaiming ‘Theatre Tours!’ He was bouncing up and down on his heels, tail flicking back and forth. His siblings looked less enthused, glancing at each other in shared distaste.

“Can we go do something else while you do that?” Wakko asked.

“Like get a root canal?” Dot suggested sweetly. Bugs shook his head.

“You didn’t have to come,” he said, sounding like it wasn’t the first time they’d had this debate.

“But staying home is so *boring!”*

“Then you can suck it up for your brother,” Bugs replied cheerfully.

Dewey looked enthused at the idea; the rest of the kids, less so.

Donald was probably going to regret this.

“If you want,” Donald started, drawing all eyes, “I can take the kids to see the history buildings while you’re on the tour, and you can meet us there. If you’ll take Dewey on the tour with you.”

He wasn’t sure if that would be *better* or not, but Bugs looked immediately grateful, and Dot dashed over to hug his legs with a theatrical ‘thank you!’, so that was the plan now.

Dot darted over to walk by Webby and Gosalyn, while Wakko quietly stepped next to Donald. Dewey waved goodbye and eagerly joined the milling crowd for theater tours, chattering a mile a minute at Bugs. Yakko was clearly doing the same thing in his other ear, so Donald doubted he was actually hearing anything, but he was nodding along all the same.

Lena they found sitting near a very familiar fountain, feet swinging back and forth absently. The large globe on the top had been replaced, but it was clearly a different material than the original. Probably weighed less. Donald glanced at José and stifled a giggle. Panchito caught their glance and stuck out his tongue.

“We’re heading to the Coot building while Dewey and Yakko look around the theater, you wanna come?” Donald asked; Lena eyed Dot dubiously, but nodded. She was quiet as they entered.

Violet was not.

“This building is named after your great grandfather?” She asked, peering at the placard with interest. There was a small profile about Clinton Coot, with a photo from his younger explorer days. Just visible behind him was a red, Ari-shaped blur.

“Ah yes, you had to fight for that, did you not?” José asked, glancing at Donald.

“They wanted my name on the damn thing,” Donald grumbled. “They’re not even my things!”

“Mostly not, anyway,” José pointed out. Donald grumbled under his breath. Most of the donations hadn’t belonged to his family at *all,* they had been in the Sheldgoose Manor, but like hell was he calling it *that.*

“You might have the majority now,” Panchito observed, pointing towards a wing Donald didn’t recognize; hadn’t that used to be empty? Or some kind of storage? He could only just make out the sign, carved into the stone above the large doorway.

‘Donald Duck Wing.’

Oh.

Oh *no.*

“I did *not* want this, for the record,” Donald muttered under his breath. “I specifically said not to name anything after me.”

“You have a *wing here?!”* Della demanded, turning to stare at him and coincidentally gaining the attention of a few people walking through.

“I donated some of the stuff from our adventures, I didn’t think they would name things after me!” He insisted, wincing at his own volume.

“You donate things from our adventures?” Scrooge jumped in, staring at him with horror. Donald threw up his hands.

“They were just going to gather dust in storage, this way they’re useful to other people!”

“A *wing, though?!* How much stuff did you donate?!”

“What did you mean, you had to fight to get the building named after grandpa Coot?” Della added.

“The placard indicated that Mr. Donald was placed temporarily in charge after the previous Institute President left the role. Due to the original agreements for when it was established, if a Sheldgoose was not acting as President, the role passed to a Coot, or closest descendant, until the next election. During that time, he took the opportunity to donate both a number of artifacts housed in the President’s Mansion and a large part of the building itself,” Violet reported.

“Apparently the prior building was large enough to take up the whole block! We’re standing in part of it right now,” Huey added with

interest, now peering at the placard. Louie and Webby gathered at his shoulders.

"It was ridiculous, should have just bulldozed it and built campus housing," Donald grumped.

"The campus would not allow the new construction, and the housing department insisted they had more than sufficient space," José reminded him. "And the history department was very grateful for the building, they have much more room now!"

"Too grateful," Donald grumbled, eyeing the sign bearing his name again with annoyance.

"So… can we go see?" Huey asked, staring at the wing with almost desperate interest. Donald hesitated.

"Let's… wait, just until Dewey gets back. He'll be disappointed if he misses it." He finally said, and while they looked put out, the kids nodded, and instead led the way to the Greek antiquities.

Thankfully, not everything in the building was something Donald had personally donated, so he could relax for a bit as the kids bounced around. Well, most of them. Dot, Gos, and Wakko were wandering with mild interest, but it was clear that they were only barely paying attention. Lena wasn't looking at anything, trailing after Webby without more than a glance around.

"You kids alright?" He asked, sliding up next to them. Wakko shrugged, pulling out a piece of gum. It was against the rules, but Donald wasn't really worried about him sticking it to anything. Eating one of the exhibits was more likely.

“Not really my thing,” Gos said with a shrug, glancing around again. “I mostly came cause everyone else was going.” Dot nodded along, flicking her hair.

“Yeah, I’m more into fashion than anything here, no offense Uncle Donald,” she added. Lena, from across the room, kept glancing at him. Her fingers sparked occasionally, but he couldn’t feel her actually casting any spells, so he wasn’t sure what she was up to.

Donald considered the kids in front of him.

“There is a history of fashion wing, actually, on the third floor,” he offered after a moment. “And a cafe on the other end of this one. If you all swear not to leave the building…”

“We do, promise!” Dot swore before he could finish, and she darted off while Wakko took a more sedate pace. Gosalyn glanced at him, fingers twisting at her sides.

“Anything about superheroes?” She asked sarcastically, head tilting. Donald shrugged.

“There’s a heroes wing, a few rooms from here,” he said, “It’s more ancient heroes than the super variety, but it might be interesting?”

She shrugged, but started to make her way to the next room, so that was a win.

Della and Webby were chattering about the Amazonian legend

depicted in a carving, Huey and Violet were comparing notes over a statue of Zeus, Louie adding commentary periodically with his signature grin.

LP and Drake trailed after Gosalyn with interest, giving Donald a wave when he caught their eyes.

Scrooge hadn't left to poke around. He was lingering in Donald's six, still eyeing the satchel Panchito had strapped to his chest. He glanced at Donald, then huffed, hands jittering at his sides.

"Ah, were these all parts of Coot's collection?" He asked, gesturing around the room at random. Donald shook his head.

"His collection was more focused on family history," he explained. "A Duck ancestor was a devotee of the goddess of adventure, along with a Carioca and a Pistoles; his research was in tracing those family lines to modern day."

"Wait, all three of you…?"

"Direct descendants," José replied mildly. "Mr. Coot wrote his will to provide the cabana, and everything within it, to the three of us when we all came of age, as it contained the full body of research thus far."

"Which was a surprise; Donald at least knew who he was, but us! We only received a letter stating we had received an inheritance up north, and to arrive on April first!" Panchito added brightly. "My mama thought it was a scam, but I thought it would make a great adventure to go!"

“I was on my way to the United States anyway, I was already a transfer student. What luck, that the letter arrived in time for me to pick the correct institution!” José added pleasantly. Scrooge looked between the two of them in surprise.

“Ah, that would be the three Caballeros? I suppose that explains the band name,” Scrooge mused; Donald stifled a laugh. He had no idea how close he was to the truth.

“And the goddess of adventure, that’s… Xandra? Never met her myself,” Scrooge added, but was cut off from that line of thought as they reached the next room. Which was a relief; Donald didn’t want to continue *that* line of conversation.

Donald hadn’t seen Xandra in some time; she had been living in the cabana occasionally, but largely had poured herself into freeing herself from her cursed attachment to her atlas. He missed her. Her energetic presence, her excitement at the many changes in the world and in seeking out new ventures. But he suspected she was… distancing herself from him; had thought it since the Viking village incident, actually. He’d never said anything about it, uncertain if he was just being paranoid. Then they’d all moved out of the cabana to the houseboat. And by the time the boys had been born…

He’d had other things to focus on.

This new room was The Heroes, emblazoned in gold on a wooden sign, a smaller exhibit devoted to Storkules and his devotees. His twelve Labors, his loves and the people who had sworn their service to being heroes.

Well. The ancient ones, anyway. Storkules had actually visited this exhibit, after his brief stay at the houseboat. He’d been excited, then disappointed when he realized that they had none of his more recent

mortal champions.

Storkules was a relatively minor god; he could name each and every person that had ever been in his service. The priests, the acolytes. The heroes, whether they knew of him or not. And either platonically or romantically, he loved every single one.

Walking through the room, with LP and Drake already peering around with interest, Gos sitting on LP's shoulders and cheerfully directing him around.

Louie sidled up to them.

"So… who are these guys?" He asked.

"These are the heroes devoted to-" Scrooge started, but Louie scoffed.

"I know what the exhibit's about, I mean Bugs Bunny? His kids?" He started, before hesitating, chewing his lip in thought.

"We knew you guys were friends, I'm just curious about when you met?" He continued after a minute.

"Oh, Daffy was doing a show at a club nearby," Donald said cheerfully. "Bugs I met later, they were starting to do their first live comedy sketches at that point."

Bugs and Daffy had already known each other, having met on the set of a show they'd both been child stars in, but they hadn't started

dating until Bugs had, according to him, 'had enough of pinin',' and dragged Daffy off to figure things out one way or another.

They'd come back over an hour later, fur and feathers everywhere, and refused to confirm if they were dating for three months.

"We all used to do shows at that club!" Panchito added. "Open mic nights were very fun!"

"And the kids? Cause I don't remember them at *all,* but Dot and Wakko looked about our age," Louie continued, hands in his pockets, shuffling next to them while their group wandered from exhibit to exhibit.

"Ah… I helped Bugs with custody," Donald said carefully. "You stayed with Goofy for a few days while we got things settled, I think you were about five at the time."

Custody battles were tricky when the children in question were cloned in a lab and had no legal identities, after all. And Donald was already there getting them all *out* of the lab, he had to make sure everything was settled completely. It had been a rough few days for everyone, especially considering he had to hide what he was doing from SHUSH and Hooter.

Louie nodded thoughtfully. Donald recalled their contest again and wondered briefly how many points he'd handed his youngest.

Well. Second youngest, now. He had a baby coming.

He smiled. That wasn't going to get old any time soon.

History Exhibitions

Donald had thought that keeping his family, especially the kids, from scattering to the winds would be the issue. Instead, he found that they wouldn't go more than maybe thirty feet away from him without pausing until he caught up. Scrooge in particular hadn't been outside of a ten foot radius all day.

Which made it a bit tricky to navigate the small, cluttered exhibits beyond the big ones, interspaced with classrooms, labs, and offices (thankfully mostly vacant for the summer), so Donald opted to linger in the hallways instead while whoever was interested poked their heads in. It made for an awkward group, blocking the hall often and it meant he personally didn't get to look at much, but the alternative was packing a dozen people in a room that wouldn't comfortably fit eight, so.

Panchito and José rolled with it at least. They chatted about new work drama or Ari's newest shenanigans while Donald kept his eyes on his kids, making sure Gosalyn was with her dads and not terribly bored, that Louie wasn't getting some mischievous ideas, checking in on Wakko in the cafe (he'd all but cleared out their pastries, but seemed content to sip at a never-ending stream of hot chocolate now), and so on. Dot they hadn't seen, but until he heard screaming he figured she was fine.

Webby, Violet and Lena came out from a small Egyptian burial display to rejoin Donald's pod of people in the hall. Lena still looked distracted, and she kept snapping her fingers, and refused to meet Donald's eyes. He couldn't ask about it, there were too many people around, so he let it be, but made a note to try and ask later.

"Dewey has texted to indicate they are on their way back," Violet revealed, holding up a phone in one hand. "He was very interested in the wing with your name. May we head in that direction?"

Scrooge perked up; Donald felt a weight press at his shoulders.

The artifacts he'd donated should mostly be from adventures with Scrooge… right? Caballero ones tended to be magically dangerous, and there was no reason to donate anything from Kingdom Hearts, they were basically useless here… But he couldn't completely remember. What if there was something in there that he'd forgotten? Something he couldn't explain?

Could he keep *one* secret? It felt like the different pieces of his life were crashing into each other too fast for him to keep track of.

But he could hardly say no. Even if that wasn't suspicious of him, the kids *wanted* to see. How could he refuse?

So he agreed. Gathered the scattered groups back into one. Went back to the main floor.

Each step felt heavy, but he waved off José's concern. Panchito gave him a worried look, but he was too far away to say anything if he didn't want everyone to hear, and Donald had warned them both that he had no idea how many languages Webby or Violet spoke, and couldn't confirm they would have privacy.

Dewey reached them first, skidding to a halt to slam into Donald's knees. Scrooge caught them both before they could hit the ground, huffing when Donald staggered.

"Unca Donald! This place is great! The theatre is haunted!" Dewey announced, using Donald's arm to drag himself onto Donald's shoulders, while he held still to allow it.

“All decent theaters are haunted,” he grunted, earning a laugh. Then he glanced around, frowning, seeing as the lobby was empty of either a tall grey rabbit or a Warner sibling.

“Where are Bugs and Yakko?” He asked, as Dot walked to the doors to peer outside. She scoffed, while Dewey shrugged.

“A few people wanted his autograph,” he replied, hopping back down to land with his siblings. “He’s still outside.”

Donald sighed, making his own way to the doors. Sure enough, there was a small crowd there, Bugs cheerfully signing whatever was being held in front of him. Donald could tell he was at least a bit annoyed, the way his tail was twitching, but he wasn’t letting it show in his face.

“Ugh,” Dot groaned, “we’re never gonna get done here if dadoo keeps letting this happen.” She gestured at her family angrily as she spoke.

Just behind Donald, Wakko made an agreeing noise.

“I’m hungry,” he said mournfully, still chewing on some gum. Donald absently reached into a pocket and handed over a granola bar.

“Seriously though! He could have at least brought a fake mustache or something!” Dot continued, still glaring out the window. “We even got him one!”

She turned to face the group as she spoke, gesturing at Wakko who

was indeed now wearing a fake mustache. Attached to Groucho Marx glasses. As in, there was a second, curly mustache attached to the front of the existing fake mustache, which Wakko curled around his fingers with a grin.

“Wait, where did you get that?” Dewey demanded, hopping forward to peer at the disguise like it would do something else if he stared at it long enough.

That… wasn’t completely unreasonable, Donald had to admit. Not that *Dewey* would know that.

“The store?” Wakko answered, blinking.

“No, I mean just now!”

“My… bag?”

“But-”

“Kids, if you want to head into the exhibit, go ahead,” Donald sighed, successfully derailing the budding argument before it could get going, as his gaggle of ducklings bolted for the doors, while Dot stuck out her tongue and plopped onto a seat in the atrium, taking out her phone.

“And… yuuup, he’s already trending,” she announced to the lingering adults. “Looks like someone clocked us back at that fountain, there’s all sorts of photos.”

She turned her phone for them to look. Donald, feeling dread crawling up his spine, peered at the screen.

There they were, a mass of feathers with the occasional glimpse of the Warners in the crowd. There were several of them with Bugs chatting on the sidewalk, Bugs with Yakko and Dewey heading to the theater (thankfully none *in* the theater, at least), and their own group heading to the Coot building…

He felt sick, looking closely at Panchito in each shot Dot scrolled past, trying to see if the egg was visible, was anyone commenting on the satchel, had anyone realized what it was. Thankfully the satchel looked like a full backpack, not an egg pouch, and was only visible in a few shots; having so many kids around them had effectively camouflaged everything from the waist down.

Still, he looked around to find where Panchito was, talking to Drake and Launchpad near the stairs. Even now, his hands were casually wrapped around the satchel, but if Donald didn't know for sure that's what was in it, it could pass for a particularly full bookbag.

José caught his eye and gestured back at the door.

No, not the door. The crowd still outside. It was growing, and it was getting loud enough that they could hear murmurs through the solid doors.

He didn't want to get closer. Somehow he just knew it would go badly.

For once, the universe decided to give him a small break. Or Della did; she was already heading to the doors, and popped outside with a cheerful wave.

“Bah. Never understood the obsession with celebrities,” Scrooge grumbled, standing exactly eight feet away. Just like he had been all day; Donald was getting claustrophobic.

“I fainted the first time I met Jim Starling!” Launchpad told them all, rubbing the back of his neck with a grin. “First few times, actually. He was just such a big inspiration!”

Drake met Donald’s eyes and winced, even as he nodded. Probably a sore subject, all things considered.

“There’s just something about meeting someone who was larger than life to you,” Drake added, before he waggled a hand. “Tends not to live up to expectations, though. Never meet your heroes and all.”

Scrooge scoffed, but his face was a touch softer as he glanced briefly at Launchpad.

“You can’t tell me that crowd out there is all like that,” he insisted, gesturing back at the doors. “They’re just interested because he’s supposed to be famous.”

“You’re saying there isn’t a single person you’d be excited to meet?” Donald asked absently, glancing over at the ‘Donald Duck’ (ugh) wing entrance. It had been quiet. Far too quiet, and they were entirely unaccompanied, but it should be fine. He hadn’t said how, exactly, anything had been found when he made the donations, just the location, history and any details that would help researchers. There shouldn’t be any clear reference to Xandra or the nature of the Caballeros.

Dot and Wakko looked entirely bored again.

“Ah… Well,” Scrooge stuttered. “Meeting Isabella Finch would be an honor, if the opportunity came up.”

“The Woodchucks founder?” Drake asked, glancing at Launchpad to confirm, who nodded enthusiastically.

“She was a famous explorer! She found tons of legendary treasures and ruins, it was what inspired her to create the Woodchucks in the first place. She wanted to spread that love of adventure to kids,” he explained, waving his arms widely in enthusiasm. José hopped back a step to avoid the backswing.

“Her journal was lost to history, but it is supposed to lead to a number of ‘Missing Mysteries.' Would be a true adventure to find *that,*” Scrooge added, face lighting up with the opportunity to explain, but he was stopped by Della bursting back into the building, Yakko at her heels with an annoyed expression.

“Ugh, it’s like being the kid of a famous guy means we can’t do *anything,”* he complained, pressing the back of his hand to his forehead in a faint, before he straightened up with an excited grin, tail going straight.

“Wait, is that the wing named after you? Neat!” He announced to the room at large, and bolted for the Donald wing.

That would go well, he was sure.

Dot rolled her eyes, not even looking away from painting her nails, a

bottle of polish held in her tail.

“He’s *such* a nerd,” she said to Wakko from the corner of her mouth. He looked back at her with a raised brow, tugging on his hoodie strings.

“You spent hours watching documentaries about the First Ladies,” he pointed out with a smug grin. Dot scowled, pausing her painting to flap her hand at him.

“ *Obviously* that’s different!” She insisted. Wakko stuck out his tongue at her.

“Why is it always different when you’re doing it?” He asked, which she ignored entirely.

Donald glanced back at Della, who shrugged when he caught her eye.

“Figured the kid would prefer to get out of that crowd, and nobody noticed me,” she said brightly. “Bugs seemed fine with it, but I saw more people coming when we got back inside. Don’t suppose we can retreat back to your bear-inhabited cabana until the heat dies down?”

“We’ll have to run the gauntlet to get there,” Donald pointed out.

“We can outrun them!”

“Or we just wait it out,” Drake cut in, “They’ll lose their interest eventually, and the kids were excited to see this place.”

Scrooge was also eyeing the entrance with interest, but had made no move to go in. Drake and LP had edged their way closer in the last few minutes, peering through the door but not leaving. At least someone had their eyes on the kids, though honestly Donald should relax. It was a public building, they weren't in danger here, no matter the crowd outside. They were just some kids at a museum exhibit.

Named after him.

He really needed to get in there and see what they had. It was making him nervous; how much *had* he donated? Surely it hadn't been enough to devote an entire *wing* to it?

"I don't see why *you're* worried about it," Scrooge spoke up, drawing Donald's attention back. He stared at him for a long minute; had he forgotten…?

"Scrooge," Donald started carefully, "You do remember last time I got filmed in public…?"

Scrooge blinked at him, frowning.

"At the airport?"

Still nothing. The tension in the room rose.

Finally, Donald gestured to José and Panchito with an expectant look. Scrooge glanced at them, blinked again, and finally the realization reached his eyes.

“Wait, *that’s* how everyone found out before me?!”

What.

“What.”

“I found out about… you three dating,” Scrooge said, only choking a little, “when the bloody *Buzzards* called me to ask about it. Said it was bad for branding and some such rot, I told them to get stuffed, then they sent me some photos. Those were, what, put on the Internet somewhere?”

“Wait, the Buzzards? Like, the ancient guys on the Board of Directors?” Della demanded, baffled. “How would *they* have found out, those guys are even more old-fashioned than you!”

“I didn’t think to ask them *that!* I was a bit distracted at the time!” Scrooge insisted.

Donald felt oddly weightless, like he was at the peak of a roller coaster about to drop.

It hadn’t occurred to him to ask how *Scrooge* had found out; with everything else going on, he hadn’t really thought about why Scrooge of all people had seen a viral social media post. At best he had assumed one of the kids or Della had said something when the news broke. Why would his *Board* of all people care? To the point that they sent him *proof?*

It wasn't a secret that he was Scrooge's nephew or anything, but would anyone *really* care that Donald was vaguely associated with McDuck Industries?

"Someone filmed our meeting at the airport and decided to post it on their Tweeter account," José explained carefully. "And enough people found it interesting that they shared it. Most of my coworkers had seen it by the time I got back to work."

"My family saw it just after I called them, but we do not have great internet at the ranch," Panchito added, shrugging lightly. "I was grateful to get to tell them the news myself instead!"

Scrooge looked utterly lost, turning to look back at Donald like he was making some joke. Donald stared back, discomfort crawling along his skin. He felt warm.

"Everyone I know saw it before I had a chance to say anything," he said. "I think the only reason nobody at work said anything was because I was flying out to Spain at the time."

José caught his eye with a worried expression; Donald twitched his head in a subtle no. Despite the topic coming up a few times, he didn't think anyone at SHUSH had caught on to his identity. He'd probably gotten lucky that that video had been going around when they had been bombarded with the listening devices, though. Funny that he was feeling grateful for that, right now.

"Why would anyone do that?" Scrooge demanded, shifting towards the doors slightly. He kept glancing back now, like the crowd outside was a threat.

"Internet fame," Drake supplied, "You get a bunch of people to follow

you on Tweeter or Instagull and feel important for a bit. Some people do that for a living, advertising or selling stuff, but plenty of folks just like to gain a following."

He looked a bit ashamed as he said it. He *was* an actor, though Donald hardly considered that to be the same thing. Besides, he wasn't nearly as bad as-

Nope. Don't think about it.

He knocked his hand on the wall behind him without looking, begging the universe not to take his half-formed thought and jinx him.

"And filming people is legal?" Scrooge asked, appearing to be so confused he'd actually lost his usual all-knowing demeanor. Drake shrugged.

"If you're in a public space there's nothing really stopping it? I mean, I think you can take legal action if you're being harmed by it or if the content is inappropriate, but besides that, nothing I can think of," he explained. "That's why paparazzi are still a thing."

"Ugh, I do *not* miss random people trying to get my picture," Della groaned. "Remember when we had just moved in, Don? I think there were people following us around once a week!"

At least those had only resulted in them getting kidnapped, he thought darkly.

"So you all just found out because of this video?" Scrooge asked softly; there was something in his tone that dragged Donald's attention back

to the present violently. He sounded almost *hurt*.

"We weren't actually dating until the airport," Donald answered, watching his uncle closely. "We did back in college, but we broke up when I moved back to Duckburg. I planned to tell everyone when I got home after helping them unpack, but…"

He had to assume, for his own sanity, that the first person hadn't meant for it to happen. The fan that had recognized them had probably just been excited. Each person involved had likely never given it a second thought, assuming that if anything was wrong, the previous person would have known. That one more comment or repost was just a drop in the bucket, not nearly enough to make a difference one way or another.

Apparently his latest response to that whole thing was also gaining traction, but at this point he refused to look. He had enough problems to deal with (even if *this* one was likely to get worse the longer he ignored it…), and besides the notification number ticking upwards every time he glanced at the app on his phone, it had been fine.

"Oh." That was all Scrooge said, brows low on his face and hands clenched around the head of his cane. Donald squinted at him, and almost asked what he had *thought* happened, but drew back, considering they had an audience.

"Is this a bad time to say I actually saved that video…?" Panchito asked the group at large, cracking the tension like an egg.

"You *what?!"* Donald demanded, spinning to face his partner directly.

"It was a good shot! I wanted to commemorate our meeting, after so many years, and it was right there!"

“We just saw each other at the weird carnivorous plant village!”

“I do not think that really counted,” José replied with a shrug. Donald shot him a look, but Panchito was already pulling out his phone to gesture with.

“Look! Tell me we are not an attractive trio!” He insisted, and from his hands the video started to play. Donald saw himself spinning, hearts all but visible in his eyes. The hesitation, the kiss, the dip. José appearing, Donald nearly tackling him. He’d seen it enough, and almost said so, but bit his tongue when he saw Panchito’s serious look. More so than he expected over a small disagreement.

He glanced around, and saw Scrooge again, leaning forward to see the screen better; Panchito stilling so it was easier to watch. His face was concentrated, clearly seeing nothing but the small video.

Oh.

Donald grumbled under his breath, but his annoyance left him. Which left him feeling awkwardly at odds, and his gaze traveled back to the wing with his name. He couldn’t hear the kids, but the building had a tendency to muffle sound, that wasn’t unusual. Nobody had rushed back to ask him about this or that item, but they *might* just be waiting until later? Or Webby, the family expert that she was, had been able to determine the origins of everything so far.

Was it terrible of him to feel relieved that they were so distracted?

The doors opened; the chatter outside grew, then cut off. Donald turned to look, expecting Bugs to be standing there with a grin.

He was standing there, but no grin, just an irritated scowl, arms crossed, foot tapping as he leaned against the doors.

“Got all your whiskers?” He called, smirking at Bugs’ glare.

“Fans I can do,” he grumbled, “I like fans, they’re fun. But I really wish they would let me spend the day with my kids; I ain’t here for a press tour!”

Donald could relate.

“There are quite a few people,” José observed. “Odd that they didn’t follow you inside.” Bugs waved him off, flicking his ears behind him as he straightened away from the doors.

“Neeh, I know a few tricks. Besides, some other fella showed up and distracted ‘em. Say Don, is that your name on that room?”

Totally Insaney

Their group finally made their way into the exhibit, with Dot loudly groaning behind them. Wakko had been mollified easily enough with another snack and a promise of lunch soon, so he was happily chatting with Launchpad as they entered.

Donald felt… calm, honestly. He should probably still be worried, *had* been worried earlier, but now that they were all inside, it didn't seem like a big deal. He could finally see the room, for one, and nothing was screaming at him as magic, so highly unlikely to be from a Caballero adventure.

Come to think of it, he really didn't think there had been much *to* donate. Xandra's paranoia about Felldrake had been at an all-time high after their last battle, and she'd insisted they keep everything while she tried to determine what had happened to him. When neither he or Sheldgoose had been found, they'd first thought the pair had been completely destroyed in the blast, and relaxed, getting the cabana back in some order and dealing with the Presidency thing (plus, they had had finals to deal with!).

But after a few weeks, Xandra had gotten worried, consulting everything she could find on demon warlocks and Felldrake and any written records of the final battle with the first Caballeros, the ones that had trapped Felldrake in the staff in the first place. She'd started insisting that the blast shouldn't have killed him, that they needed more power than that to actually kill him, and with Sheldgoose's body being missing as well, she had been certain he was still kicking, somewhere.

They'd gone looking. And looking. And looking. Her atlas hadn't given them any information, no allies (or enemies) had seen either of them (or Leopold) since the final battle, nothing strange was happening in any other realms that they could reach to check… It had been a wild goose chase, literally.

It had been José to crack first, all but begging for a reprieve so he could study, surely there would be evidence to act on if they were patient, allowed Felldrake to think he was still hidden…?

Panchito had agreed, pointing out that Leopold hadn't been seen either, so if they were out there, they were probably in hiding, not out doing nefarious deeds. Donald, fresh off a SHUSH mission sandwiched between two quests for information, hadn't had the energy to do anything but yawn and nod. Xandra had been furious, accusing them all of being too cowardly to take up their mantle of Caballero again, that the battle had clearly been a one-off, not a sign they were true heirs of her friends' roles.

They had kept searching. Burned out, snapping at each other, desperately balancing their normal lives with an increasingly obsessed goddess, they kept looking.

Then the Viking village, Donald deciding if he was going to be going on adventures non-stop, he might as well go on one with his family to get them off his back (and some part of him had hoped it would be fun for once). Coming home half-dead and three-quarters frozen. José had had to temporarily block his access to magic to get it off, panicking that the shock might kill him instead (and Donald would have laughed, if he could, at the irony. Too little too late for that concern after all). Panchito had lit a fire, made hot foods and drinks, wouldn't let them leave the cabana until Donald's temperature rose back to normal, and…

Xandra had backed off, after that. Gone looking on her own, for a time, before pivoting to working on breaking her atlas curse.

"Hey, I remember that helm! Wasn't it haunted by some French ghost?" Della announced, pointing to a nearby stand. The helmet gleamed in its case, feathers still fluffy and pristine. The ghost had

wanted his forever home to stay nice, and had spent most of its energy keeping decay from setting in.

"Yeah; he moved on when we finished writing up his life story," Donald replied. The bare bones version of said life was on a plaque in front of the helmet, but the full version had been given to a medieval historian for further research. She'd sent him a copy of the book when it was done, with a thanks to 'Sir Reginald, Duke of Chutney, and his transcriber' in the front cover.

"He was funny; glad he got to say his piece," Della said, eyes darting to another display. "Oh! That's a chest from the *Flying Dutchman* !"

"Wait, really?" Drake asked, twisting to look.

"There's nothing in it," Donald warned, but Drake trotted over to look at it anyway, LP and Wakko trailing behind.

The kids he could see scattered around the exhibit; they were in pairs, which was weird, and taking *notes,* which was weirder. Huey, sure, he liked everything written down to refer to later, and Webby had her personal family scrapbook, but the others?

Well, no, Yakko wasn't doing that. So it was just all of *Donald's* kids, plus Violet.

Baffling. Donald decided to ignore it, wandering further into the room, if only to let Scrooge look around, since he *still wasn't leaving.* What would it take to get some breathing room?

He glanced at Panchito, making a face, earning him a laugh and even

more people in his space, Panchito sliding close to wrap his arm around Donald's shoulders. The egg, even through the satchel, was a warm spot against his side.

"I wondered what you did with all of these things," Scrooge muttered, more to himself than anyone around them, peering at a captain's logbook carefully preserved in a sealed case. There had been extensive work at the Institute to get it scanned before it could degrade any further, Donald recalled.

"I don't recognize the book; where's it from?" Della asked, popping back over. Donald considered it, trying to recall why he had it in the first place.

"I think we found that in a pirate's cave, with a bunch of treasure," he said slowly, trying to put it back together. "...and the bodies of the crew of the *Rautt Naut.* "

"Oh! Yes, they were trying to use the treasure as dragon bait!" Panchito said, snapping as he spoke.

"You guys fought a dragon?!" Huey demanded, appearing out of *nowhere* , eyes wide.

"No," Donald said.

"Yes," Panchito replied. They glanced at each other.

"The cave had a *sea serpent,* that's not a dragon!" Donald insisted immediately.

“I was thinking about that one in Wales, actually,” Panchito retorted.

“Technically that was a spell that was *shaped* like a dragon,” José mused, tapping his chin.

“I thought it was a dragon trapped in the scroll?” Panchito asked, frowning.

“No, cause it disappeared in a puff of smoke when the girls burned the scroll; it was definitely a spell,” Donald said absently.

“Well, what about that quetzalcoatl in Mexico?” José proposed.

“I don’t think there’s a consensus on them being dragons or not-” Donald started.

“Slow down, I can’t write that fast!” Webby protested; Donald looked up to see that the rest of their group was standing around them, watching with sharp interest. “When did you go to Mexico again?”

“Wait, hold on, I want to hear about the spell-” Lena insisted.

“You found a *sea serpent* in a cave full of *treasure?!”* Louie shouted over all of them.

“Who are ‘the girls’?” Scrooge interrupted, frowning.

“Daisy’s nieces; they spent a lot of time around the cabana back then. Daisy was supposed to be babysitting most of the time, but… eh, we didn’t mind them being around.” Donald answered the last part first.

“And they were around to activate a dragon spell?” Scrooge demanded, but he was shoved back by Della, who stared intensely at the three of them.

“Forget all of that, obviously he brought them along! But since when did you three go on adventures at *all?!* You always said you were too busy to go!” Despite her tone, she looked hurt.

Donald suppressed a wince. Too busy for Scrooge and Della, usually, because Xandra took priority, and then SHUSH, then finals… and honestly, he had *hated* going with Scrooge and Della at the time. Hated always feeling unsafe, watching out for them while getting himself injured or thrown into danger for his trouble. Hated Scrooge’s bizarre back and forth between treating him as an incompetent idiot and acting like they were partners in arms. Della’s smug, know-it-all attitude, like he had never been to a cursed temple just because he went on fewer family trips than she did.

When he had so little free-time, it had been an easy decision. He went if they *needed* him, but if they didn’t he made any excuse not to go.

None of which he wanted to say.

“Most of our, ah, adventures, weren’t planned,” José explained casually. “Donald would say, let’s go sailing for the weekend! And we would discover cursed treasure. We go on a trip to Wales, and we discover old spells that one of the girls activated… things like that.”

“You decide to have a reunion after a bunch of years…” Dewey

started with a grin.

“And it turns out to be a carnivorous plant controlled village?” Louie finished, smirking. José nodded with a bright smile.

“Sim, exactly!”

“Maybe you should stop going on trips,” Dot offered, looking down at her phone, tail flicking. She frowned at the screen, tapping at something.

“Bah! What is life without some danger?” Panchito asked.

“Safer,” Donald grumbled, but his heart wasn’t really in it.

“Besides that, we met Humphrey while staying home for the night,” José pointed out. “So we may be cursed in general.”

“May you live in interesting times,” Violet recited, a small smile on her face. Donald hissed under his breath at the curse; he hardly needed *more* help with his terrible luck! But the kids laughed.

“Yeah, sounds like adventure finds you whether you want it to or not Unca Donald!” Dewey exclaimed with a wide grin.

Behind them, there was a brief noise, but Donald couldn’t make it out. Probably the exterior doors; there *was* an open house going on, after all.

“Okay but seriously, can we hear about the sea serpent?” Louie asked.

“No, I want to hear about the quetzal-thing!” Dewey retorted immediately.

“Quetzacoatl,” Donald, Huey and Yakko all said in unison.

“Bless you,” Dot said in a sickly-sweet tone. Yakko flicked her in the ear; she growled and twisted to glare at him.

Had that happened a few years ago, she probably would have tackled him, so her only clawing at him threateningly was an improvement. Bugs certainly looked pleased by her restraint. Or he wanted them to fight, hard to say.

“Alright, but what *is* a quet-sa-coat-el?” Dewey asked, sounding his way through the name carefully.

“It is a feathered serpent-” José started.

“That is also a dragon!” Panchito added.

“That is considered by some to be a dragon,” José conceded, “native to Mexico and Central America. It is associated with wind and rain.”

“The Aztecs considered him a god of death and rebirth,” Panchito supplied. “The one we met was certainly fierce!”

“We found his nest, I don’t blame him for being protective,” Donald interjected. “The poor thing had eight eggs to protect.”

“We weren’t going to harm them! We were there to get Panchito’s hat *out* of the nest!” José exclaimed, broad smile on his face.

“How was *he* supposed to know that?!”

“Unca Donald?” Huey interrupted, face dropping, staring behind them. Donald turned to look.

He swore under his breath. He *was* jinxed, clearly, because that was Mark Beaks standing in the main lobby, phone in hand, crowd of people behind him. He was already looking their way, smirk solidly in place.

This room was a *dead end.*

Donald groaned. It wasn’t that Beaks was a physical threat, not on his own, but Donald remembered his obsession with Gizmoduck and all the collateral damage around that. His kids had nearly *been* part of that collateral.

He was coming in, already spouting some nonsense into his phone about coincidences, and Donald remembered the main reason he hadn’t wanted to be photographed today, jerking around to look at Panchito’s bag and their egg.

Except he didn’t have a bag. He looked a bit confused about it himself,

looking at Drake with a mild frown.

Drake, who was tugging the satchel onto his shoulder carefully, pulling his jacket to cover part of the strap. He caught Donald's eye and grinned sheepishly.

Drake was Donald's current favorite person.

'Woooow, what's up guys? What are the chances we run into each other here?" Beaks asked his phone, because he clearly wasn't talking to them, while a few people trailed after him with mild interest. Not exactly the excited group that Bugs had been dealing with, but still more people than Donald wanted as witnesses. They'd been lucky that the other bar patrons had been just as annoyed with Beaks, and that he'd been stupid enough to attack the bouncer.

"Pretty high, you creepy stalker," Dot answered blandly, still flipping through her phone. "You were in Duckburg until the first picture with dadoo got posted."

"I mean, maybe he wants to go back to school?" Yakko offered with a smirk. "It's not like he's been able to invent anything useful, he could be going into coding."

Beaks paused, blinking at them in confusion. Behind him, the crowd murmured.

"... and you are…?"

"We're the Warner brothers!" Yakko and Wakko announced immediately, leaping into action with matching grins.

“And the Warner sister,” Dot added, slipping her phone away to join.

“I’m Yakko!”

“I’m Wakko!”

“And I’m the one that has more followers on Tweeter than you!” Dot finished, using the brief distraction to steal Beak’s phone and peering at the screen with a sympathetic expression. “Ooh, honey, your profile pic is *not* doing you any favors.”

“Actually, seeing it in person, I think he’s doing alright,” Yakko said, leaning over her shoulder.

“Mm, photoshop is doing a lot of work there,” Wakko nodded thoughtfully, looking back at Beaks with a curious expression. “You should really get that mole checked out, it doesn’t look good.”

“What- who- give me back my phone!” Beaks shouted, and the Warners took off like a shot. Donald took a step back to let them get by, his own kids giggling and spreading through the room.

“Hiiii people watching Mark Beaks stream, Dot Warner here, youngest child of Bugs Bunny and fashion/women’s history extraordinaire!” Dot called into the screen, before tossing it to Yakko before Beaks could snatch it from her hands.

“Hello people watching! I’m guessing most of you are here cause watching this is like a train wreck,” Yakko said cheerfully, juggling

the phone between two hands while Beaks spun to face him, scowling. He twisted the phone to point at Beaks, who was huffing in anger, clearly too angry to remember he had Jim the bodyguard with him.

Jim didn't look like he knew what to do anyway, so it probably wouldn't have helped.

Yakko tossed it to Wakko, who caught it with his tail and dangled it upside-down in front of him.

"What are his videos even doing?" He asked the room at large, flipping to walk on his hands and letting the phone dangle in front of his eyes. "All the old posts are things like 'New Announcement!' and "See my latest codes!', and then its just him showing off something his workers did. Do you even do things by yourself?"

"Besides following more popular people to ride their coattails because he isn't interesting on his own?" Dot asked, stopping entirely to lean against a display near Lena. Lena snorted, smiling for the first time all day.

"He's tried to kill two kids because he has a crush on Gizmoduck and doesn't know how to deal with it," Lena replied; Dot's ears perked up with interest.

"Ooh, spill the tea!"

"He interrupted a date to try and steal the Gizmo armor! Then he got us trapped halfway up the Money Bin while he King Konged all over the place!" Huey announced with a scowl. He then blinked, as the phone landed in his hands, Wakko flicking it from his tail so he could cartwheel back to his feet.

“Wait, does he have a thing for the hero, or just the armor?” Wakko asked as he landed.

“The armor,” Huey, Webby and Donald replied at once, while Drake snorted a laugh. LP frowned, shaking his head.

“The armor is useless if the pilot isn’t- isn’t a good person,” he insisted.

“Yeah, didn’t Beaks steal it and nearly blow up a press conference?” Louie called loudly, while Huey scurried away from an increasingly enraged Beaks. Jim was still standing at the doorway, uncertain, while the small crowd watched with amusement.

“Oh yeah, he totally blew it up, the *real* Gizmoduck saved everyone,” Huey explained, finally throwing the phone to Webby. She whooped and darted around a display, seeming to vanish.

“That is *not-”* Beaks growled, before he stumbled and smacked into Della. Della took a step back, scowling and actually brushing her jacket off as Beaks recovered and got back up.

Unfortunately, the slight fall seemed to remind him that there were other adults in the room, and he stopped his undignified racing around to look around at them all. His eyes finally landed on Bugs.

“You going to try controlling your kids?” He snapped, every inch the snobby rich businessman, before he visibly dragged his ‘cool’ persona back over himself. “My phone is kinda a major part of my job, you know, gonna need it back. I get that meeting a celebrity is a big deal and all, but you mind reigning it in?”

Bugs let one eyebrow rise slowly, glancing at his three kids, who had taken the moment to stand just behind him, hands clasped behind them, every inch the innocent angels. Huey and Webby had slipped back to their group with flushed grins.

“Don’t think they’ve got your phone, doc,” Bugs said, leaning back like he was checking their hands.

Donald took the second to glance around, and spotted the phone, being carefully placed behind a tall glass case by Dewey, angling the screen so it was pointed at their group. Gosalyn was standing just below him, clearly having given him a boost up, giggling into her sleeve.

“Yeah, see?” Wakko asked, holding out his hands. His siblings followed suit, all showing empty palms. Dot then flipped hers over to admire her nails.

“You just had it! We all saw it!” Beaks insisted, before he spun to look at Scrooge.

“Then yours got involved!” He insisted. Della’s face went indignant; Donald would bet his face matched. A hand landed gently on his shoulder, another at his elbow. Red and green.

Yeah, he probably shouldn’t lose his temper here. He let out a harsh breath.

“Um, ‘scuse you, those are *my* kids!” Della snapped, stomping forward to stab Beaks in the chest. He looked down at her finger with a sneer, taking a single step backwards.

“Uh, sorry, who are you?” He asked, in the smarmiest tone Donald had ever heard.

“Della Duck. Those are *my* boys, thanks so much,” Della started, warming up into a full rant, but was interrupted.

“Pretty sure they’re McDuck’s kids,” Beaks argued, “seeing as they’re always around *him.* Not really sure what you’re trying to prove here, but-”

“He’s their *uncle,* great uncle technically, are you really so oblivious you never actually asked who the kids you nearly killed were?!”

“I mean, I guess McDuck is a bit old to have little kids,” Beaks mused, before he glanced over at Donald. “Wait, so are these the nephews you were talking about?”

“You stalked him from Duckburg to St. Canard,” Drake spoke up, “and had no idea who he was?”

“Uh, obviously he’s the gay guy that went viral a while back,” Beaks said dismissively. “I just wanted to say hi to a local celebrity, it wasn’t *stalking.”*

The hands on Donald’s arms tightened. Della let out a growl.

“When was *this?”* Scrooge demanded, turning to face Donald and ignoring Beaks entirely. Donald frowned, glancing at Drake with a frown.

“A week ago, maybe?” He asked. Drake shrugged.

“Sounds right,” he replied. “My filming schedule has been so packed I’ve lost all sense of time.” Donald could relate; between FOWL, the Blot and the latest… adventure, he felt like he’d been marching through syrup.

“He *followed* you? All the way to St. Canard?” Someone asked from the crowd. Donald didn’t look, but was completely confident they were filming. It felt like he was spending half his time on camera.

“Why were you in St. Canard?” Dewey asked, popping back to the group and peering at him with interest.

“Drake asked me over for a drink after work,” Donald said simply. He figured that was bland enough to be uninteresting, but Gosalyn gave him an odd look when he spoke, and Drake winced.

Great. Apparently that wasn’t what Drake had told her. Come to think of it, did she know about him being Darkwing Duck? He was pretty sure she had met Darkwing first, so he assumed he’d told her the situation when he adopted her…

He shook off the thought. Something to worry about *later*.

There was a lot of stuff on that list.

Dewey at least accepted the story with a nod and turned back to Beaks and Della, who were both glaring at each other. Scrooge huffed,

rolling his eyes.

“Beaks, would you leave my family alone? We were having a nice time before you arrived with your… fans,” he said, glancing at the crowd still in the room. Said crowd shifted in a mass, like they didn’t like the moniker, but nobody spoke up.

“It’s like we can’t even walk around town without getting followed around by people,” Louie added faux-casually, “It’s really creepy, honestly.”

“Yeah, we just wanted to see the school,” Dot tossed in, pouting and looking up at Bugs with big eyes. Bugs nodded, ears twitching.

“I get people wantin’ to say hi, but I really don’t like them taking pictures of my kids and me when we’re just tryin’ to get groceries or take a school tour,” he said, half to their group and half to the crowd, who shifted again and murmured.

“I got my relationship outed just because someone thought we looked cute together,” Donald said pointedly, as the hands on his arms squeezed again. “Don’t really get the urge to do things like that, personally.”

Sure, it was less than subtle, and the awkward in the room could be cut with a knife, but it got the point across. Hopefully one of them *was* live-streaming or filming and people would listen this time. At the very least, he could hear a few people shuffling back out of the room.

“Uh, *duh,* it’s so you can get popular?” Beaks broke his staring contest to say. “Growing an audience is, like, the most important thing these days.”

“How’s that working for you?” Yakko called out, leaning against a display case, wide grin in place.

“One of us has a crowd of fans everywhere they go,” Beaks pointed out snidely, and someone in the crowd finally spoke up.

“We’re just here to watch the trainwreck,” they called out, “I was on campus for the tour and figured it made for decent entertainment. Sorry for interrupting your day though,” they added, and now Donald could see them, a taller cat with a nervously flicking tail. Looked to be in their early twenties, a phone hanging limp from their hand.

He didn’t reply, but his face must have made clear what his opinion of that was, because they flinched and backed into the crowd towards the door. A few others slipped out with them.

He felt a bit bad. Maybe. A smidge.

“What!” Beaks demanded, losing interest in all of them to walk towards the dwindling crowd. “Uh, come on, I’m Mark Beaks? CEO of Waddle, the company of tomorrow?”

“Yeah, and you’re a walking cringefest that was following around some guy and his family to get internet points from an old meme,” a robin in the front pointed out, shoving her phone away. “How sad are you?”

“That isn’t remotely what’s going on! Did I mention that this guy *assaulted* me?” Beaks insisted, gesturing at Donald. Donald winced, but nobody even looked at him, not even his own family.

“And… you wanted to hang out with him and his family after that?” The same robin asked skeptically.

“Well, obviously I was gonna give him a chance to apologize-”

“That’s not happening,” Donald called out.

“And *you* were the one detained that night, if I remember right,” Drake added. “Cops let us go back to drinking, *you* got in trouble for attacking the bouncer.”

“Wait, *what?* ” José asked, appearing at Donald’s elbow to look him in the eye with surprise. Panchito stifled a laugh into his shoulder.

“ *I* didn’t do anything!” Donald insisted.

“No, but you did take Jim down,” Drake pointed out, gesturing at the bodyguard, who didn’t look too pleased to be the center of attention.

“With *your* help! And the bartender!”

“You also carried him out of the bar, I heard,” Panchito added cheerfully. “Didn’t you win a bet?”

“ *You* weren’t there,” Donald grumbled, but he was struggling not to laugh. Beaks looked affronted, his kids looked proud, Della looked like Christmas came early.

Scrooge had a funny constipated on his face, which made him laugh harder.

“No, but Drake is a very good storyteller!” Panchito insisted, releasing Donald’s arm so he could wrap an arm around Drake’s shoulder instead. Drake grinned at him.

“Are you guys seriously ignoring me?!” Beaks whined.

“Say something interesting and we might pay attention,” Yakko replied, not even looking up from where he and his siblings had settled onto the floor to play jacks. The boys were standing around them observing, while Violet had taken the opportunity to continue looking around the exhibit.

“ *Interesting?!* I’m Mark Beaks!”

“Sweetie, can you and your friends keep it down?” Dot asked. “You’re interrupting our game.”

Beaks let out an enraged scream and stormed out, shoving his way through the remaining crowd, which dispersed back into the lobby with sheepish glances and cringing body language.

“Does this mean he doesn’t want his phone back?” Huey asked casually, just as the building doors thudded shut.

… nice

Bugs took the kids to continue their tour, after that, waving goodbye with a smug grin; he always looked smug, that wasn't terribly unusual, but in this case it was probably because his kids had managed to snatch Beaks' phone before they parted, despite Dewey, Webby and Lena's attempts to get back to it first.

Their own group opted to go home. Donald was too twitchy to even think about staying in public at this point, with Beaks' fans and whatever the gawkers would prefer wandering around. They could follow Bugs, but the Warners seemed excited at the idea of getting a new 'special friend,' and had been whispering about finding Beaks for a round two when they walked away. Donald knew better than to be around for *that,* so he subtly steered the group towards the cabana instead. The kids weren't usually very careful about collateral damage.

He expected someone, anyone, to disagree with the plan, but got no protests. As soon as he said they should maybe head back, even though they had only gone into the one building and he was *sure* Violet wanted to see more at the very least, everyone was nodding and agreeing that they could come back another time and see more, and these crowds *were* thick, and they really didn't want to run into Beaks again…

He didn't think his family had been this agreeable *ever.* Maybe when they'd decided to send him on that ill-fated cruise.

But he took the blessing and led the way back to the house, whispering to José that they should start sending out the news of their impending hatchling before someone *did* see the egg and make obvious connections. Donald would admit he was probably being paranoid, but it wasn't like they *weren't* going to tell their other friends and family, this was just another reason to do so quickly.

José thankfully agreed, nodding and starting to type something out on his phone. Donald leaned over, but was waved away.

"I will handle this part, you should focus on the sidewalk," José chuckled, as Donald stumbled into his shoulder. He grumbled, but focused back on walking. Fine. He didn't want to have to deal with it.

… he didn't really have anyone to tell anyway. His family was here, minus Fethry (and how would he even reach him?), and José had the contact info for any of his friends he would want to get the news to. Maybe Fenton and Gyro, when he saw them next, but other than that?

It wasn't like he didn't *have* other family, a few more scattered cousins, his McDuck grandparents in Scotland, Uncle Ludwig, Aunt Matilda… but they hadn't been close in a long time. Not since- well, he didn't know. When Grandma died? When they'd moved in with Scrooge? It had felt so gradual he hadn't noticed until years later.

He'd heard that Scrooge had even passed off Launchpad for him last time they visited Scotland. A visit he hadn't been asked to join, though Scrooge usually hated seeing his parents and had only been looking for the Templar treasure anyway, so it really didn't matter.

Ari waved at them when they reached the cabana but seemed focused on making… something. Tape, ribbons, and glitter littered the kitchen table, but Humphrey growled and blocked the doorway before any of them could get closer. They hurried along, down the stairs, through Donald's room, out of the houseboat, and onto the empty beach.

Someone, obviously Bentina, had cleared everything up from the last few days of camping out there, and a note pinned to Donald's door said dinner would be served at the Manor. Clearly she was tired of them not being in her domain, Donald thought with amusement.

As they were walking up the hill, Lena hung back, making it look like she was casually peering at the beach, and Donald waved away José and Panchito to steer in her direction. Scrooge was harder to fend off, until Della grabbed his arm and demanded they start plotting for their next adventure, and he was carted away.

Whether she was helping or just coincidentally stepping in wasn't clear.

He got closer, and noticed that Lena didn't just look contemplative, she looked worried. Almost scared. He moved faster, until they were walking side by side, far behind the family heading up the hill.

"Lena? Are you okay?" Donald asked, as soon as they were out of earshot of the others.

"Huh? Yeah, fine, just fine," she mumbled, eyeing him from under her bangs. She was chewing her beak, and her fingers twisted together.

"Can you be my magic teacher?" She burst out, and Donald blinked at her in surprise.

Him?

"Uh…" He said intelligently, tongue thick in his mouth. He wasn't-why would she want *him?* He'd figured she would be asking José!

"Um, I mean," Donald continued, utterly incapable of stringing an intelligent sentence together.

“I mean, you don’t have to, only if you’re up for it…” Lena continued rapidly, aiming for cool and missing by a mile. “It’s just- Magica was useless for teaching me, like, *anthing*, and based on the other night it looks like you know what you’re doing. Is all.”

Well- well, it wasn’t that Donald *didn’t* know, it was just that- there were a thousand reasons he should not be the choice!

… he was blanking on them at this moment, but he was positive they existed!

“I’m… self taught, for the most part,” Donald finally managed to get out, “My last student opted for someone else; we weren’t clicking.”

April had felt awful about it, but she couldn't do magic the way Donald did it, and he’d never been able to get his head around how she naturally cast spells. He couldn’t forge magic, she could, and in the end she had found another mentor. José had covered some of her basics, but after he had moved back to Brazil she had branched out.

Then again… Lena wasn’t going to be a witch. She was magical already, she didn’t need to know how to *create* magic, she needed to know how to *use* it.

“Your last student?” She asked, and oh yeah, he wasn’t alone. Donald nodded, absently.

“My niece,” he replied quietly, missing her. He didn’t get to see them much, not since they had graduated high school and moved away. He considered Lena for a long moment. She looked up at him through her bangs again, casually slouched.

“I would be happy to do it,” he finally told her, and was rewarded by a surprised smile.

“There is one other thing, though,” he added, with a heavy sigh. “What do you know about the Phantom Blot?”

Nothing, as it turned out, except that someone had mentioned him briefly yesterday. Had Magica done *anything* for her? Besides using her to get to Scrooge? Donald walked her through the core basics of the original case, focusing on Lena and not doing public magic unless she had to. No need to linger on the worst details.

“I don’t want to scare you,” Donald stressed, “but he is *dangerous,* and right now he’s in the wind. I promise I will let you know if we learn anything. And we need to talk to your dads about both.”

Except it turned out *that* had been resolved without him.

“I told him I was gonna ask yesterday, actually,” Lena admitted. “We’d talked about me probably needing some kind of teacher, before, but I didn’t have any idea where to even start looking. So… yeah, kinda lucky how that turned out.”

“That’s- that’s good, thank you,” Donald said, blindsided by not having to do it himself, honestly. “I still want to talk to them about the Blot, but… yes, we can start doing lessons. As soon as we get some privacy,” he added sheepishly.

“Do you… is it a secret?” Lena asked, face twisting. Donald paused, frowning. He didn’t want to ask her to *lie.*

But- If Webby, or Violet, or really any of the kids caught wind of Donald teaching magic, it would be sheer chaos. Dance lessons, sure, those were private, but *magic?*

"I would prefer you not mention the specifics of our lessons, to keep the others from trying to copy you," he said slowly. "How you'll do magic is different than how they would, if they ever want to try. But no, it's not a secret. I just don't want a crowd." For either of their sakes. The last thing Lena needed while she was learning was an audience. At least while she was getting the basics down.

Lena looked relieved at that, and nodded, fast, before she recovered and gave one slow, decisive nod.

"Yeah, I think I'm good without a peanut gallery."

"I can send a message to the Director for you," Bentina offered quietly, when they had a brief second without someone checking in with Donald, long after dinner had been served. "As I imagine you'll want a few days to… process everything."

What a kind way of putting it, Donald thought with a snort. Process. Be followed everywhere and watched like a hawk in case he decided to spontaneously combust would be more accurate. He was almost grateful for the drama that having an egg was causing; at least that was a distraction from nearly dying.

"Sure, thanks," he replied. "Tell her 'nearly died, nbd. Having a baby xoxo DD.'"

The look on Bentina's face at *that* almost made all of this clingy behavior worth it.

Until it was properly evening, Ty picking up Lena and Violet, Drake and Gosalyn were driving off with LP, Drake promising to text him later 'to check in,' whatever that meant, and it was just Donald and his family. Family that was still refusing to let him out of their sight.

"I'm going to *bed,* " he insisted, gesturing towards the hill. " *My* bed, to be clear. I don't need to spend the night in the Manor."

He needed some *space.* The night right after, he'd been too tired to care, but last night had been awful. Too many people shifting, groaning, not used to sleeping on a boat, keeping him awake with every unexpected noise. Boats weren't meant to be silent, especially not ones on the water, but he could tell the difference between a creak from the waves and Della wiggling on the couch.

Scrooge scowled at him; Della was lingering on the edge of the room, José and Panchito behind Donald. The kids were already in bed, or were pretending to be; he'd heard enough to know a few of them had already moved to Webby's room, which was the go-to place for scheming.

"Your old room is plenty big, there's no need to walk that far in the middle of the night," Scrooge snapped, gesturing around the Manor.

Sure, it was big enough for *Donald.* The small bedroom with its twin-sized bed, laid out with spare linens Bentina would have to pull from storage. The window that couldn't be opened anymore, because when Scrooge had repainted it after Donald moved out, he hadn't wanted to tape things off, and the sill was still stuck. The impersonal, cold,

barren room he'd emptied of anything even remotely important to him years ago. Della had stolen his hat once from it, hoping to get him into some kind of treasure hunt for it, but, well, he'd never seen it again.

Besides… his gaze briefly darted to José and Panchito. Apology or not, Scrooge had made his opinions on them being in his home *very* clear.

Scrooge caught his glance, and his face went blank.

"Come on Don, we can have breakfast together in the morning!" Della jumped in, grinning. Donald rolled his eyes.

"I can walk back up in the morning. I'm sleeping in my own home. Goodnight." He announced (why did he let himself get into debates like this? He was an adult! He could just leave!) and turned to walk out the front door.

He was still expecting to be stopped. As he opened the doors, as he went through, he waited for someone to continue the debate.

But they managed to leave unbothered; Donald had to force himself not to look back.

The path was properly lit with soft yellow light on the Manor side, fading to only the glowing rocks Webby had painted as they reached the woods.

Don't look back. Don't look back.

“Ah, Donal’? Are we all going to try and fit on your hammock?” Panchito asked, sliding up next to him.

Ah phooey. Donald stopped walking to groan, throwing his head back. He’d forgotten about that; he just needed to get out of the Manor so *badly-*

“We could slip to the cabana and sleep in your room instead,” José suggested, popping up on the other side. “We would only be a moment away, when morning arrives.”

“What if someone comes looking in the morning?” Donald asked reasonably.

Well, *he* thought it was reasonable, but José’s expression said otherwise.

“You are not required to sleep where your uncle can find you,” he reminded Donald gently, but Donald shook his head.

“I don’t care about that, I want the kids to be able to find me,” he insisted. Scrooge hadn’t crossed his mind, honestly; why would he be checking in?

Surely he wouldn’t be so clingy tomorrow?

“And we will be on the other side of the door if they do,” Panchito pointed out. “Besides, you and I will be awake with the sun! We will have plenty of time to get back to the Manor before breakfast!”

Well, they were all but guaranteed to oversleep now. Or the portal wouldn't work. Or the houseboat would sink overnight (again) and everyone would think they were dead and they'd go through the doorway to be underwater and have to swim back to shore and-

Two hands on his cheeks. Dark brown eyes staring into his.

"Donald," José said gently. "We do not have to. We are only making suggestions to make tonight easier. One of us can sleep on the couch at the houseboat, it isn't a problem. But please speak out loud when you are worried. We cannot help if we do not know the issue."

He let out a breath. It came out shaky, and he took a few more until they were mostly even.

"I would prefer to sleep in one bed," he finally admitted, eyes squeezed closed. "I don't want anyone to have to sleep on the couch, and I have to get something new for all of us to fit in. I *want* to sleep in Panchito's bed together, but I'm worried about the kids not being able to find me. Scrooge and Della too, if they come looking. Or Drake, or Bentina, or… well. Anyone."

"But…" and here Donald stopped. Bit his tongue, shook his head. He couldn't say this. He *couldn't*.

"Donal'?" Panchito asked, stepping up next to them. He wasn't crowding in, but Donald could see him through his squinted eyes, and why was everything watery?

"Nothing, it's nothing."

“Donal’. Please,” Panchito asked, begged. “Please tell us when you need help.”

“I… I don’t want them to come looking. I want to *leave,* go somewhere else and just- not have to deal with this right now! I nearly died! We’re- we’re going to have a *baby,* and everyone *needs me* and I just *can’t handle this right now!”*

He felt awful as the words left his mouth, tasting bitterness on his tongue. How could he say that? How could he *feel* like this? His kids needed him to *be there,* to not leave them alone and defenseless, they depended on his support, and his *stability,* and here he was complaining that he wanted them to *go away*.

He wanted to just *feel better,* but he kept getting hit by wave after wave of problems and emotions and everyone *else’s* problems and couldn’t catch his breath.

It was normal, he reminded himself. Being a single parent meant scraping any few minutes for yourself from late nights and early mornings, the gaps between school and dinner where he could retreat and breathe. It was finding the money for all the boys to go to camp so he could enjoy a few days alone. But they had *enjoyed* that, it was a treat for everyone, not Donald abandoning them so he could, what, sleep? Lay around doing nothing?

José was still peering at him closely, frowning.

“They have Scrooge, and their mother. I imagine Launchpad and Mrs. Beakley would be available as well, if there was a need. You have help, Donald,” he reminded him, gently grasping him at the shoulders.

“And Gladstone is here,” Panchito added. “I heard he took the children for donuts yesterday? It seems he is able to help.”

He… had done that, hadn’t he? Just stepped in, offered exactly what Donald needed in the moment without blinking.

“Perhaps we ask him to watch the boat, and to let us know if someone is coming to wake us? Or to let them know we went to the cabana?” José suggested.

“Yeah… yeah, that would work, if he’s still here,” Donald agreed absently. He hadn’t really thought about it until now, but Gladstone *had* jumped in at just the right moment, hadn’t he? And Donald hadn’t had a moment to thank him for that. It felt like he was swimming in molasses the last few days, everything was too fast and far too slow. It felt like the last few days had lasted weeks, and yet like time was going far too fast to really process everything that was happening.

“The light is still on in his bungalow, we can knock and see if he’s still there,” José promised, Panchito nodding in agreement, and they continued down the hill.

For a moment, Donald was thankful that was *all* they were addressing, leaving the rest in the darkness to be forgotten.

“And we will be talking about the rest of that later, amor,” Panchito added, slinging an arm around Donald’s waist. He sighed.

Panchito stepped ahead of them, skipping ahead to knock on the door. Donald half expected nobody to answer, for the bungalow to be empty and Gladstone had just forgotten to turn out the lights. It wasn’t completely moved in yet, last Donald had heard, it wouldn’t be that odd for Glad to still be staying mostly at the hotel.

But the door opened, and his drowsy cousin appeared, hair in curlers, rubbing one eye. He glanced at Donald and José, still walking towards the porch, then at Panchito. His face was thoughtful. He nodded to whatever Pancho was saying, yawning, and slipped back inside without a word.

Problem apparently solved, Panchito slipped back over to them, and they arrived at the houseboat.

It was almost surreal, slipping back through to the cabana. This morning it had been exciting, crowded and frantic to get everyone through. The afternoon had been similarly chaotic. Now, it felt like coming home. Here was his space, rocking on the waves, and here was their space, quiet and cool in their underground rooms.

Panchito's bed was a mess of blankets and pillows, with a nest in the center. Donald all but fell into the center, with José sliding in on one side and Panchito flopping in on the other, the egg carefully nestled next to him.

"We're gonna have a baby," Donald murmured sleepily, hand tracing over the eggshell. It sparked under his palm, gentle waves of joy warming him inside and out. José leaned against his back, chin on his shoulder, hands reaching over to join his on the egg.

"I have sent messages to Daisy and the girls," José reported quietly. "I imagine we will be hearing from them soon."

"Xandra?"

"She helped us reach Olympus, she sends her congratulations but was

very busy," Panchito replied, pulling a few blankets over them.

"She is," Donald agreed, frowning. "She's been very busy for a long time."

"I suppose after being trapped for so long, she is eager to not be vulnerable to the atlas again," José suggested. His heart wasn't in it. Donald nodded anyway.

"If you went to Olympus," he said slowly, eyes sliding shut, "the gods are all going to gossip about it. They're all busybodies."

"We don't know any other gods…?" Panchito said hesitantly, but Donald did.

"Storkules," he mumbled into the pillow. "He's gonna be the *worst.* "

José and Panchito giggled together, each snuggling closer.

"We should make him the godfather!" Panchito chuckled.

" *No."*

"He would be the most protective godfather ever appointed," José said in a faux reasonable tone.

"Absolutely not."

“What if we make Xandra the godmother?”

“Panchito, just because we know two gods doesn’t mean we *need* to choose them.”

“Who else can say their godparents are gods!?”

Donald let out a snore and refused to reply.

In the Shadow of Discovery

It had been three days. Three days that he'd been told to 'take it easy.' Three days where he was, supposedly, going to rest, relax, and recover from the whole ordeal.

Donald looked up from the casserole he was reheating (one from Drake), to look out at his living room. Which was crammed with his kids, Lena and Violet, Boyd who had arrived yesterday, Della and Launchpad, all yelling and cheering over some board game.

Yes. Resting.

Had you asked Donald earlier, he would not have said his living room could hold so many people. If you asked him *now,* he would still say that. Dewey, Webby and Lena were all crammed into one armchair, Louie was sitting on LP's lap, while Huey, Della and Boyd were sprawled on the couch, the boys being bounced around by Della's enthusiastic flailing.

Violet had at least been wise enough to steal a pillow from the bedroom and sit on the floor, but she was nearly bowled over every time someone needed to get up, so it was probably an even trade for space.

Scrooge had decided not to play. *Scrooge.* Decided not to play the Scroogopoly game with the kids.

No, he was sitting at the kitchen table, twisted to watch the game, Donald, and the egg set up under a warming lamp on the table. Every time Donald so much as twitched, Scrooge's eyes darted over to him.

Three days of this. Three. Days.

José had had to leave two days ago, a flight to Thailand and back that he had done all he could to get out of, before Donald had forced him to go. Not worth taking the time off, and besides, this way he could hoard it for when the hatching started. José had been reluctant, but eventually agreed, and after a long goodbye, had left.

Panchito was outside the boat, mostly to get some air, likely hanging out with Gladstone. They'd bonded, apparently, and while Donald was pleased to see them getting along, it was incredibly odd to watch. Panchito was an energetic person, Gladstone was usually laid back and more sedate.

Then again, so was José, so maybe Donald was just surprised to see Glad being genuinely friendly with anyone outside the family. Usually he was more… standoffish. Closed off. Pleasant to talk to but rarely more than that. He said it was because small talk was too much like work.

Sure, Donald thought with a sad smile. Sure, just that.

It was nice to see them getting along.

His phone pinged again, probably the hundredth time. They'd finally gotten the news around, texting everyone they could think of. Donald begging they just call or text, please don't visit just yet. He wasn't sure he could handle anyone else.

April and May had already responded with excited congratulations, April laughing that of *course* they couldn't just adopt, it was a magic egg from a volcano, that made way more sense. June hadn't replied just yet, May letting them know she was in some work training and

had mentioned she wouldn't have phone access for a few days. Odd, but nothing worth worrying over. Daisy had called just to scream in delight in Donald's ear, before saying that he needed to make a registry *yesterday,* so she could buy them baby gear.

Terrifying idea, that. They hadn't had a registry for Della, Scrooge insisting he would get everything she needed, and there had been no shower. They should probably have had one; there had been plenty of disappointed relatives sending letters or calling to say they wanted to see the boys' eggs before they hatched. Donald would probably have to have something to make up for it.

He'd gotten other calls, Mickey and Minnie, Bugs again now that Daffy could be updated, José's sister, Panchito's entire family on the loudest group call Donald had *ever* been involved with… that part was tiring, but at least fun. He'd been reassured (several times now) that Artemis was certain the egg was healthy, and would hatch into an infant, not a perfect recreation of the person that had died. Reincarnation. They might have a few memories of their first life, but only memories, and they were likely to be faint, given how long they had been trapped in the gem. So they were safe to celebrate a new baby.

She still couldn't confirm the species. Donald was still certain they were going to have a firebird.

A crash.

"Sorry Unca Donald!"

"Nothing broke!"

Three days.

Bentina had tried to corral everyone out of the boat, but after half a day of goading people back to the Manor for meals, only for everyone to immediately follow Donald back to the beach, she had thrown her hands up and retreated back to the Manor alone.

Donald should probably give in and go back to the Manor himself. He'd been able to convince the kids to sleep there at least, but the minute they were awake, they were back down to knock on his door, *Unca Donald wanna go fishing, can we go to Funzo's, it's time for dance lessons! You promised to teach me swords!!*

He didn't mind that part. Mostly. Sure, it was still overwhelming, and he just wanted to sleep for a few days while his feathers grew back and he stopped waking to the taste of ash, but spending time with his kids wasn't a hassle. Even if he desperately wished someone would help him handle the load; four kids were a lot to keep entertained and happy.

No, it was the others that were starting to really put him on edge.

Scrooge *wouldn't leave.* He was there when the kids arrived, insisting that he wanted to talk about setting up for the baby or getting those lights set up on the hill, what do you think Donald? And then settling down with his notes and papers at Donald's kitchen table without a blink.

The first morning had been especially jarring, since they *were* woken by loud banging they could hear clear from the cabana, and burst back to the houseboat to find Gladstone arguing, loudly at that, with Scrooge.

"They're *trying to sleep,* and so was I, honestly, do you ever rest?" Glad

had been explaining with a genuine scowl, unperturbed by Scrooge's matching expression. "God forbid you let anyone sleep after the sunrise, Grandma let us all sleep later at the *farm!"*

He hadn't stopped even when they spilled onto the deck, so José shrugged and went back inside to nap on the couch, while Donald sighed and made coffee. Gladstone had growled and muttered, taking the mug and retreating back to his own house. He was wearing a fluffy bathrobe and slippers, somehow avoiding getting sand on any of it.

Scrooge now only let Donald leave his sight if he was left with the egg to watch while Donald did something else.

Which had gotten Donald a very good photo of his usually composed uncle holding the egg in both arms with a wide eyed look of panicked adoration. Donald genuinely couldn't wait to see his face when the baby hatched.

Then there was Della. She was… Donald didn't know. She was acting like nothing had happened, and like she was only around because everyone else was. Kids appear on the beach, Scrooge in the kitchen, Della trailing down the hill with a wave and a bag of lawn darts, and *did you guys know these are illegal now? Let's play!*

She was also constantly suggesting new adventures. Here's a cursed tome, what about this mountain range, have they considered finding a gryffin nest and taking some feathers? Nothing unusual about that. The kids lack of interest wasn't surprising, given the last few days; they needed a break and some time to process.

He'd pointed that out to Della yesterday, when it became clear she wasn't going to clue into their reluctance on her own, but she'd waved him off.

“They just need a good one to reset! You know, cancel the last one out? And I think this one would be awesome, just hear me out-!”

Donald had scowled and turned away, only for Scrooge to step in.

“No adventures for a bit,” he’d insisted, eyes hard. “We’ve got a little one coming we've got to prepare for, and the kids need a breather. Leave it be, lass.”

Della had threatened to go on one *alone,* grumbling that Scrooge was getting weird in his old age, but he’d waved her off and asked Donald to look over some ideas he had for the cabana.

“You’ll need that place child proofed! You can’t tell me that crazed caretaker will do it!”

Ari’s definition of safe *was* incredibly weird, Donald agreed, so he sighed and agreed to look them over. Della glowered at them both, before she apparently decided to throw herself into whatever the kids suggested with gusto.

Donald gave it a week at best before she started pushing for them to get back out there again, but at least for right now she wasn’t stressing the boys out with her suggestions.

His boys… he wanted to talk to them about what had all happened, but couldn’t get time alone with them to actually *talk,* and in a larger group they all insisted they were fine, just needed some quality time together was all, and hey, what are you going to name the baby?

Which derailed the conversation pretty thoroughly, Donald had to give Dewey props for that one. He hadn't tried it again.

Someone shouted from the living room, and the chaos doubled. LP had at least two kids hanging off of him when Donald glanced up, and there was an ominous thud that he refused to investigate. Casserole. He was making casserole.

He was going stir crazy. He almost wanted a Phantom Blot sighting just so he had an excuse to leave!

Wait, no, bad idea. His family didn't know his secret identity, they wouldn't take that as an excuse. What if he said Paperinik needed him…?

That would probably only work if he offered to take Dewey with him. Huey wanted to meet PK too, actually. Louie wouldn't want to be left out, and Donald wouldn't want Webby to be the only one left at the Manor even if she didn't ask…

Well, that wasn't really going to work.

Maybe Kingdom Hearts would need him.

Another thud from the living room.

Maybe he could just fall into a coma.

“Still think we should sail off,” Donald grumbled into Panchito’s chest, ignoring the chaos. He’d been convinced to join them in the living room, and had been given the armchair while the kids had flopped onto the floor, joining Violet.

“Mmm, we will have to leave at dusk, or we will be spotted,” Panchito murmured back. They had the egg gently wrapped in their laps, pulsing with warmth and joy. The egg wouldn’t be able to understand the chaos, but apparently they *could* tell it was a good thing, and it rang with happiness at every shout.

Donald wished his *head* did, but it was only ringing with a pulsing migraine that had started two days ago and hadn’t fully subsided.

In absolute truth, he knew he wasn’t healed. His body was fine, but the fire had clawed through his soul, desperate to escape, and *that* damage wasn’t as easy to wash away. He felt drained, too hot and cold in turns, haunted by dreams and memories too faint to understand, and the ever-present taste of ashes on his tongue.

But nothing except time would do much for that, so he forced himself to keep on going.

Della was sitting on the arm of the couch, and she caught his eye when he glanced around the room again. She smiled, gently, and for a moment her expression shifted to an almost desperate fear, eyes going wide, before it shifted to a manic grin and she threw herself back into whatever game they were playing.

Donald blinked, trying to make sense of it. Della had been more *Della* since they’d gotten back; more animated, more adventure-focused, determined to spend time with the whole family at all costs, even if it was a board game instead of her preferred activities. He was struggling to figure out why, though. Della didn’t like to dwell on

things going wrong, sure, but this felt something else. She'd been laser focused on figuring out how to work with the boys since she had returned from the Moon, and while she wasn't perfect at it, she'd gotten very good at reading their moods. To keep pushing an adventure when they were still clearly rattled…

Or was Donald overthinking it? The boys were calm, at least in the group, even if they were insisting on spending more time together than usual. No breakdowns, no real freak outs that weren't about the baby. Maybe the boys weren't as bothered as he thought they were, and it was *Donald* that was hesitant.

Well. Hesitant wasn't the right word. Completely disinterested, still rattled, focused on having a new baby… there were better descriptions. It was *Scrooge* that was hesitant. Between blowing off Della's suggestions and continuously offering other distractions, it was pretty clear Scrooge didn't want to go back out yet.

Donald wasn't oblivious. Scrooge was an adventurous, confident man; clearly Donald's near brush with death had thrown him off. His clinginess only confirmed that; much as it was annoying, it at least made sense. But it left him uncertain about Della's reactions.

Maybe she was just trying to move on, and it only stood out because Scrooge wasn't right there with her for once?

Donald grumbled again and settled further into his seat. Which was Panchito's lap. He earned himself a chuckle.

"Sunset," Donald muttered, "We're gonna leave at sunset."

"Unca Donald, aren't you going to play?" Huey asked. He sighed, sitting up with a shuddering groan.

Yes. Yes, he was.

Donald woke with a sore back and a heavy feeling on top of him. Whispers caught his ears, but it took a long moment to sort them out, ears still muffled by sleep.

"... still injured, and needs rest. He will be fine after some more sleep, that's all." Panchito.

"... how long… go back out? With the… soon, we won't be able to… for a while!" Della, insistent. Frantic. Desperate? Donald tried to get up, and the things on top of him shifted with him, a sleepy grumble coming from his torso.

He opened his eyes. He was laid out on the couch, the room dim and shadowy. All four of his kids were sprawled on him, sleeping soundly. He could just see Lena and Violet in the armchair beyond.

"I don't think…" Panchito was saying.

"Yeah, no offense and all, but he's *my* brother," Della interrupted. "I think *I* know what's best to do here."

"You ought to ask *him,* " Panchito replied sharply. "Instead of coming to a decision without checking first."

"Bah, he doesn't know everything. If I listened to him every single time, we'd never do anything!"

Donald shifted again, just enough to see around the corner of the armrest, into the kitchen. He could just make out Panchito, silhouetted by the kitchen light, but nobody else.

“Donal’ knows what is best for *him,* and would not appreciate any of us plotting around his wishes.”

“He’s just a worrywart-”

“Who I love, and am about to have a baby with,” Panchito interrupted this time. “I trust his judgment, and if he doesn’t wish to go on more adventures for some time, then I will not argue.”

“Huh,” Della said, in a drawled sarcastic bite, “the boys thought you were so *cool.* Didn’t realize Don found someone just like him. Congrats, I guess.”

Donald fought back a growl, mindful of the kids sleeping on him.

“I didn’t realize your family did not think respecting others’ choices was important,” Pancho replied coolly.

“What, you’ve never had to force someone to do something good for them, Mr. Perfect?” She demanded, and Donald really wished he could get free. He could almost *feel* the pressure rising.

“Why are you so certain another adventure, so soon after the last one, is good for him?” Panchito asked.

“He’s *Donald,* he needs to get out there! Once he’s actually on an adventure it’s like he opens up and is actually *alive* for once, when we’re home he’s all buttoned up or never here, and as soon as that egg hatches he’s going to be stuck not going out for *years* and-” Della stuttered to a stop.

The house was silent. Even the waves seemed to recede and pause, the boat creaking ominously.

Donald was holding his breath. The little ones on him felt still and quiet, their whispered breaths fluttering against his skin.

“This isn’t about me.” Della snapped, after a long moment. Panchito hummed in response.

“He really does seem happier out there. Or, when you two are around, I guess,” Della continued after another minute.

“Donal’ does enjoy being out there, as you put it,” Panchito agreed. “He enjoys adventure and danger and excitement. He does not enjoy being afraid, but he is not truly afraid of much. What he does fear…”

“Is the kids being hurt,” Della sighed. There was a creak, like she was leaning against the cabinets, or had sat down in one of the worn chairs.

“Is the *family* being hurt,” Panchito corrected. “Any of his family. You, Señor Scrooge. His children, and there always seem to be so many of them…” Della chuckled at that.

“He doesn’t like them being hurt, and is very afraid they will be. And he will throw himself in front of any threat he sees, and is always watching *for* those threats. Do you see?” Panchito pressed. Della mumbled something.

“It sounded like he’s not like that with you two,” she muttered, Donald straining to hear. “You talked about all kinds of things at that museum, and he sounded like… it sounded like fun.”

“We have a good time, even in those situations,” Panchito said easily. “Donald is a fierce leader, when he wishes to be, and afterwards we celebrate with good food and music.”

Della mumbled something again.

There was a noticeable lack of movement on Donald’s chest. The breaths were too even, too deep.

Donald let out a theatrical yawn, and felt all four jump.

“Donal’!” Panchito called out happily. “If you are awake, I believe your tío went to get ingredients for s’mores!”

Donald opened his eyes again, to look up at Panchito’s upside-down face. He was smiling cheerfully, blandly.

Donald had totally been caught eavesdropping. He smiled back sheepishly.

“Kids? I’m hearing something about s’mores,” Donald said, wiggling until he could free an arm to gently shake a shoulder. That happened to belong to Webby, who shot up *just* too fast to be believable, rolling to the floor before springing up.

It was chaos after that, her tugging at the boys (who were much better at faking sleep), then at Lena and Violet (who… may have actually *been* asleep), before finding Boyd in the boys’ bedroom reading one of Huey’s older Woodchuck manuals.

Outside found LP and Gladstone setting a fire (well, LP *trying* to set a fire, before Gladstone tripped and managed to catch a spark for a dramatic flame), with Bentina supervising. She waved at them as they emerged, but looked largely exasperated.

“Mr. McDuck asked me to keep an eye on you while he was gone,” she whispered to Donald under the noise of everything else. “I’m surprised he isn’t demanding updates every five minutes.”

“I’m shocked he didn’t send *you* instead*,”* Donald replied. She shook her head.

“Oh, he tried. I told him you were likely to sneak off if he continued to be so… insistent, and he ought to practice some distance.” Huh.

“Whose idea was the fire?” Donald asked, glancing around. It wouldn’t have been Scrooge’s, since he was… well.

“Launchpad’s, he thought we ought to be enjoying the outdoors,” Bentina answered, gesturing to the duck in question. He was carefully poking the fire, more cautious than Donald had *ever* seen him, which… actually made sense, he was a scout leader. Crashing was different than supervising a fire in the woods.

Probably.

Bentina moved away, and someone walked up behind him.

“I know you were listening,” Panchito whispered in his ear.

“I know you meant for me to listen,” Donald replied, leaning back against his chest. He felt more than heard the agreeing hum. Two arms crept around his waist.

“There was clearly something on her mind,” Panchito agreed easily. “I thought she could get it out in the open.”

“Usually she would talk to me. Or Scrooge,” Donald murmured, watching the group drag a few chairs out amidst the logs for seating, Huey and Boyd discussing the perfect s’more method, Dewey interjecting that burning the marshmallow was the better method, Louie opting to just eat the pieces separately to avoid having to wait.

The girls were poring over Violet’s notebook with intense interest, Webby writing something down on scraps of paper. That… eh, it was fine, what harm could they get up to with witnesses anyway.

“Ah, but who does she talk to *about* you, or Scrooge?” Panchito replied, and Donald had no answer to that. Up until the Cabs had moved back to Calisota, he hadn’t had anyone to talk to about them either.

“Gladstone?” He offered up after a minute, but it was a weak answer

and he knew it. Della hadn't been as close to Gladstone, she and Fethry usually got on better honestly (despite the fish issue), and Fethry wasn't here. Last Donald had heard he was trying to figure out what kind of scientists got to study krill, and sailing around the world with his giant friend Mitzy.

Panchito didn't even respond to Donald's suggestion, which told him everything he needed to know about that one.

"So you thought I needed to hear what she didn't want to tell me?" He asked, but Panchito shook his head.

"I think she wants to tell you this, but can't find the time. You have been surrounded since we broke the news," Panchito pointed out.

Speaking of that, he could see Scrooge coming down the hill, a large picnic basket in his arms. Even from that distance, Donald could see him scanning the beach; probably for Donald. He didn't think he could even pretend there was another option at this point.

"Not entirely by choice," Donald replied.

"You cannot fault them being worried."

"No." Donald agreed with a sigh. "I can't."

Then the boys drew him away to make s'mores, Panchito laughing as he was dragged away to the fire. Well, he couldn't exactly say *no* to s'mores, could he?

Eye of Newt and Cinnamon

It was the weekend, and finally, *finally,* he could go more than a few minutes without anyone checking on him, following him, or panicking if he wasn't immediately visible. Huey, Violet and Boyd had a Woodchucks meetup that Della had volunteered to chaperone, so they had gone off with Launchpad. Webby and Dewey were up to *something,* something they insisted was *not* an adventure, just a little project, don't worry about it!

Louie was supposedly hanging out in the Manor, though Bentina couldn't say where exactly he was when he'd asked, so he was probably scheming something. Or he'd holed up somewhere so nobody would bother him, but that tended to lead to scheming if he was alone for long enough.

But Huey going to camp or Louie scheming or Webby and Dewey getting up to their own chaos meant they were doing well.

Scrooge hadn't so much gone back to his usual schedule as *vanished.* He was already gone on 'errands' when Donald asked after breakfast. Nobody knew what those *were,* but Della had guessed that he was out buying whatever he thought the hatchling would need, given they were setting up three different nurseries.

Which… Donald should be working on, with his free time. Panchito had to work, José wouldn't be back until tonight, so Donald was on egg duty. Using that time to decide how to lay out the nursery would make sense, given he really would have to convert the spare bedroom or completely change the layout of the houseboat. It would take some thought, and he had some free time right now, the egg hadn't hatched yet…

So obviously he and Lena were trooping into the woods for a quiet

clearing to practice magic in.

She'd appeared at his door after everyone else had left, tense and trying desperately to remain chill at least in appearance, and Donald had nodded along to her suggestion without a second thought, bundling up the egg in the new satchel.

"You know, this would probably be creepy to anyone else," Lena said conversationally, arms swinging at her sides. She was calmer now, had relaxed the moment they'd hit the shade.

"Oh?"

"Walking into the woods, not really talking? It kinda feels like we're gonna do some ritual to summon a demon," Lena joked, hopping over a log. Donald chuckled.

"Didn't you girls do that last week?"

Lena waved him off with a smirk.

"Toootally different thing, dude."

They reached the clearing Donald had been aiming for. It wasn't close enough to the Manor for anyone to come across them accidentally, but it was close enough to get there in a hurry if they needed to.

It was also where he'd first practiced magic, which in hindsight had been a bit silly. The woods, for an ocean elemental?

There were a few large rocks scattered on the ground, worn smooth over time, which made for decent seats. Donald brushed leaves off of one and sat down gingerly, cradling the egg. Lena flopped onto another.

“So… what do we start with? Spells? Potions?” She asked eagerly. “ *Are* we going to summon a demon? Cause that’d be rad.”

Donald shook his head.

“First, I need you to tell me something. Where does your magic come from?”

Lena frowned at him, before pulling the purple amulet from underneath her sweater.

“This…?”

Donald frowned, shaking his head again.

“That’s basically a battery, anyone could use it. Where does *your* magic come from?”

Lena stared at him, the amulet slowly falling back to her chest.

“ *My* magic?” She repeated, staring at her hands. “Uh, shadows, I guess?”

“You guess?” Donald asked, frowning. “Have you never used it before?”

“Uh, *duh,* I’ve done magic before,” Lena scowled. “It’s just inconsistent, and I can’t control it, and half the time it’s blue instead of purple and I don’t understand *why-”*

Oh boy.

“Alright, I think I know what the issue is,” Donald cut her off before she could work herself into a frenzy, hands glowing faintly, tugging at her hair.

“The purple is shadow magic,” Donald explained, when she looked at him again. “When you’re using the amulet, your magic will look like Magica’s purple, because that’s her magic in the gem. *Your* magic, the magic that’s part of you, that’s the blue you’ve seen. That’s what we need to find.”

She stared at him, then back at her hands. They flickered with color; purple, a flash of blue, then back to purple. She scowled.

“I know how to use the amulet,” she grumbled, “I can’t get that blue to show up. Not for long at least.”

Donald considered her. Considered the glow from her hands.

No, not just her hands. From the friendship bracelet.

Well then.

"It might help," he said slowly, "if you take the amulet off. You're able to reach your own magic, but the amulet is probably more familiar, so it's the first thing you find."

He didn't hold out his hand for it. Lena had carried it religiously since her resurrection, clinging to it at times. He doubted she was even aware she did it, fingers absently tapping at her chest when she was nervous.

He could hardly blame her for finding some comfort in confirming its continued presence within her reach. It had been the lifeline she had used to come back to life, after all.

… hadn't it?

Lena's hands clenched around the amulet's chain, glaring at him. Donald looked away to give her a moment to think, fussing with the egg satchel in his lap. It thrummed with contentment, a gentle warmth emanating through the bag into his hands.

Should he have brought them? Magic could get dicey, but Lena's magic wasn't violent, and Donald was here if anything went sideways. But it was nerve wracking. Everything about having a new egg to care for was nerve wracking.

There was a quiet metallic clink. Lena crossed her arms, the amulet sitting on the rock in front of her. Still within reach, the chain trailing towards her like she hadn't let go immediately.

“Alright, so you want me to try a spell now?” She asked, glowering at him from behind her bangs. She raised her hands, gesturing in the most sarcastic Donald could remember seeing, before letting them fall back into her lap. “I can’t feel anything now.”

Donald glanced at her wrist again. No glow.

“What does it feel like, when you cast a spell?” He asked her.

“Uh… magical?” She replied, one eyebrow raised. He returned the look with a flat one of his own. She groaned theatrically.

“Ugh, powerful? I don’t know what you’re booking for here.”

“Try closing your eyes,” Donald suggested, and followed his own advice. He could hear her sighing again, shifting and muttering, before she settled down.

“Cool, now we’re outside *and* blind, can’t wait to get attacked by raccoons or something,” she snarked, and Donald snorted a laugh before focusing.

He could feel the waves crashing on the shore from here, could almost hear the seagulls crying, taste the salt on his tongue. His bones felt the tug of the riptide, the heat of the fissures leaking magma in the water and the chill of the darkest depths.

“The ocean feels like a never-ending ebb and flow,” he told her, “always moving. I can almost taste it. Every kind of magic feels

different, and no two people are the same. Even you and Magica would use shadow magic differently, would *feel* different."

Another sigh.

"Magic… well, the amulet's magic, so Magica's I guess… it feels. Cold. Dark, like how you know it's pitch black even with your eyes shut. Slimy, like cave walls, or rocks on the shore," Lena murmured, more to herself than Donald.

"But I don't know what *my* magic should feel like," she continued, sounding more animated, and Donald would guess her eyes were open again, staring at him. "I've never done it on purpose, half the time I didn't notice the difference!"

"There's never been a time you cast a spell without the amulet?"

"No-" A pause. A hesitation.

"No?"

"There was… okay, there were a few times when Webby and I, or Violet and I… we did a kind of chant? About being friends? And we did cast a spell that way…" Lena said hesitantly. She sounded surprised at her own answer.

"What did those feel like?" Donald asked, hiding a smile.

"Warm," Lena said immediately. "And bright, like fireworks, or a

bonfire. It felt… like hot chocolate with cinnamon, green tea and the smell of rain. I… oh!”

Donald opened his eyes. Lena’s hands were lit with the faintest teal glow, her bracelet gleaming like a beacon, and her face wide and open like a child seeing their first snowfall.

She looked up at him, beaming, and splayed her palms for him to see.

“I got it! Look!” She exclaimed, hands fluttering and making the light dance.

“Great job kid,” Donald praised with a smile, and Lena flushed, looking away. Her glow faded slightly, but didn’t go out.

“So, my magic is literally friendship?” She asked, trying and failing to get her smile under control. “Kinda lame, not gonna lie.”

“I’d say your love for your friends being so powerful it’s literally magical is pretty cool, personally,” Donald replied, shrugging. Lena scoffed, still fighting a smile. She flicked her wrists, and the glow went away. Another flick, and it was back.

The third movement brought nothing, and she frowned.

“It’ll take some practice to consistently reach it, but it looks like you’ve got a feel for it,” Donald told her, beaming. He hadn’t thought it would be hard for her to find it, but that had been fast. Clearly she’d been subconsciously ready for the change. Ready to grow out on her own instead of using Magica’s influence.

Lena continued to frown at her hands, wrists flicking back and forth with no magical push.

"Doesn't magic… take from the source?" She asked hesitantly. "I mean, I get you said there are different ways of using magic, cause you clearly can when being shot by the Phantom Blot or whatever is supposed to stop that, but… if this is my friendship with Webby and Vi, I don't want to hurt it." She looked back up at him, earnest and biting her beak. Donald shook his head.

"A witch takes magic, and has to pay it back in," he explained gently, "but you're not a witch. You aren't taking it, you're just using it, you're not going to hurt your friends."

"I'm really not hearing the difference between taking and using," Lena grumbled, crossing her arms to lean on her knees.

"It's… hm," Donald hummed, pausing to think. How best to explain this?

"Think of magic like a river," he finally landed on. "Witches and wizards are on the shore, and to cast a spell they need to take water from the river."

"Like a bucket of magic?" Lena asked sarcastically, but Donald nodded; it was accurate enough for this.

"Sure, or like a water mill. They need to pay it back in or the river runs dry, and some rivers… you can't take the water without having issues. Like wind, or the ocean."

“Or the sun,” Lena added, perking up, before she slumped back with a scowl. “I mean, if you’re talking forbidden power sources.”

“Right, exactly,” Donald agreed. “But you’re a magical creature, Lena, you’re not sitting on the shore. You’re… a fish.”

“A fish,” she repeated, face blank. Yeah, this wasn’t his best metaphor, but he was coming up with it on the fly, sue him.

“A fish. You’re already *in* the water, you can’t take it out any more than a fish is taking water while it breathes. What you need to learn to do is swim.”

“Swim,” Lena recited back at him. Absolutely amazing amount of judgement coming from her right now, she should give Louie lessons.

“If you come up with a better way of visualizing things, go for it,” Donald told her cheerfully. Sure it was clunky, but it got the point across.

“So where do you fall in this story?” Lena asked him, leaning forward. “Flying fish? Cattails?”

This, Donald had an answer to.

“I’m a sailor, Lena,” he told her with a grin. “I’m in a boat.”

“Okay, but *why* do none of these spells make any sense?” Lena demanded, hands glowing a steady teal blue now, pointing at Violet’s notebook with a scowl. Donald glanced at it, but as the notebook wasn’t open, he had no idea what she meant.

“Again, try to hold it for a full minute,” he directed, and the notebook rose shakily into the air. “And I’m going to need a bit more detail.”

Lena grunted, both hands straight in front of her, sweating, while the notebook bobbed back and forth.

“Like- half the spells will mention using Latin or Greek,” she hissed out, “and others will just say stuff straight out. And there’s ingredients, potions, spell circles- why don’t any of them make *sense!”* The notebook shot in the air as she shouted, then fluttered back down. Lena reached out and caught it with her hands instead of magic, wiping her brow.

“Vi asked me to take notes, or tell her stuff after,” Lena revealed with a huff, flipping aimlessly through the pages, “but you already said that this won’t even help her, *and* I still don’t get it!”

She tossed the notebook aside, gently, and flopped to the ground to take a drink of water from the bottles Donald had brought.

He let them sit in silence, peering out into the woods to consider his answer. They were surrounded by the calling of hundreds of birds, chittering squirrels, wind rustling the leaves… It was a natural kind of peace. Not quite his thing, but nice enough.

“That’s a complicated answer,” he told her. Lena pouted, leaning back

to lay flat on the ground with a theatrical thud and groan.

“Of course it is,” she grumbled to the sky.

“Would you feel better if it was a simple reason that you’d missed this whole time?” He asked. She scowled at him and made a vague gesture.

“Well go on, regale me with complicated magic stuff,” she invited. He rolled his eyes.

“There’s a lot of reasons you might do a ritual instead of making a potion or casting a spell,” Donald said to the trees. “More intricate goals usually need a more complicated setup to get the result you want. They're like a recipe; you don't need one for simple things, but you probably want one if you're baking a cake so you don't forget something. Potions can be stored for long periods of time, so they’re good for when you can’t cast the spell immediately.”

“So your spell circle was because it was a complicated thing you wanted to do?” She asked, still staring at the sky.

“Yes, and because it let me focus on the search instead of keeping the spell active,” he replied. “I just need to keep it powered instead of focusing on what I wanted to do. Pre-written instructions, basically.”

“So what about the rest of it? Cause I do *not* get why some spells say you have to do things, like, at sunset, or on the new moon, when other really similar spells don’t mention a time at all!” She continued, rolling on her side to look at him.

“Well, the timing can effect the power of a spell,” Donald started.

“Yeah, but why not do that *all* the time then?!” She demanded.

“Spells aren’t all written by the same person,” Donald pointed out. “A powerful fire mage doesn’t need to wait until noon to do a fire spell, but an earth witch might because fire isn’t something that earth wants to do, or a weaker warlock might do it because they don’t have the oomph to do it without the sun’s boost.”

“Oh.” Lena said. “Huh.”

She fell silent for a while, rolling back to her back and kicking her feet in the air for a while. Flicking a leaf into the air with a breath, then keeping it in the air with magic. Donald left her to it, checking on the egg in his lap (it was fine), then his email (less fine).

Apparently his inbox was full to bursting with new SHUSH news. Once he had recovered from his heart attack, he opened the oldest one and tried to catch up. Surely someone would have called him in if there was something happening?!

Two emails from OWCA. The first was just a summary Carl had been kind enough to write up, which he forwarded to 330 to review when he had a minute. The second was more interesting, for sure.

It was from Perry, who provided Doofenshmirtz's direct contact information (did he really own a company called Doofenshmirtz Evil Incorporated?), and added an interesting note: he’d asked around, and a few other nemesis had confirmed similar offers of power cells, but no recruitment offers. Which meant if their theory about what the cells were actually *for* was correct, the aim would result in an almost complete purge from the OWCA enemy ranks.

But why? Taking out competition, sure, there was some logic to being the only players in the game, but this many would be *noticeable,* and it would leave a lot of agents with more time to focus on who was making waves. Was he off-base here?

Except the OWCA agents would very likely get caught in the cross-fire…

Then he was CC'd in an email to José's cover email address, requesting he give a second magic lecture in Europe, with a potential refocus on the damage the Blot's weapons could do to living people, as well as the magical damage of trying to pull magic directly from the world.

Related, a private email from Ravenson inviting him to talk with 'Green Bat' to make sure that information was included.

Group email asking if Paperinik could come in for an interview on the Blot. A response already, from Gizmoduck, promising to ask, but warning that the retired hero could be hard to reach and may not be willing to physically enter the base.

Another email from Ravenson, asking if he could approach PK without compromising his identity.

A message from Agent 22 asking for information on the red haired woman and all recent sightings. Two reports indicated they hadn't been able to investigate the theatre she had been seen at yet, but there was a note of increased power usage in the area, and they had a plan to investigate more thoroughly.

An official assignment for Donald and 330 to go out to a SHUSH location in Tibet, as they were planning their own raid on a suspected FOWL location and Ravenson wanted them onsite for any results.

Anything else? Donald asked himself, but he had to put his phone down as Lena sat back up.

“So could I just write my own spells? And just use whatever words and random stuff I want?” She demanded, staring at him like this was some secret he had been keeping from her.

“Eventually,” he said, “but first, you need to be in complete control of your magic. Or you might just light things on fire instead.”

He gestured, and the notebook flitted back to sit in front of her innocently. She glared at it, dragging herself into a cross-legged position.

“Let’s aim for one minute this time.”

Back to work, which is honestly a relief at this point

The mission: to get back to SHUSH and start dealing with the myriad of issues that had come up in his unplanned week away.

The issues: his family was still being pretty weird, and Bentina was also going in, so the person most likely to offer a distraction wasn't available. Scrooge in particular had 'offered' to get lunch together. Lunch. Scrooge, going *out* to lunch. Donald was pretty sure that was a sign of the apocalypse.

Gladstone had moved into the bungalow now, citing that he was waiting on a few rooms to be finished, but the bathroom and bedroom were good to go, so he could just eat out and get out of the hotel at last. He'd offered a tour of the ongoing project, which was… well, it was a lot of green, in Donald's opinion. Most of the rooms were green, the furniture and decor was either neutral woods or green, and he was starting to set up plants all over, which were also, well, green.

It was certainly *very* Gladstone. Donald made a note to get him something, like dishes, for when everything was finished. He also really needed some family photos to fill in the many green walls.

The kids were at least saying they were fine with him being gone, having reverted to their usual routines over the weekend. He still had dance lessons with Webby and Dewey, and he had promised them all weapons training, so it wasn't like they wouldn't see him!

Della, though… he couldn't get a handle on her. First she was just as clingy as everyone else, then she was pushing for more adventure, now now now! And *now* she was sitting in his living room with her arms crossed while he hunted for his bag, glaring daggers at him.

“You’re seriously going back to work?” She demanded, for probably the third time since her arrival, while Donald unearthed his bag from beneath a couch cushion on the floor and peered inside to check his papers were still there. His chest ached as he moved; he needed to take a deep breath before he lost his temper.

“ *Yes,* ” he replied sharply, closing the bag with a sharp tug. “I’ve already been gone a *week,* my inbox is a nightmare, and I have work to do that I can’t do here.”

“Why not?” She retorted, stepping to one side to block the door.

“Security reasons,” he explained, again. “I can’t look at most of what I need unless I’m in the building, it's all confidential.”

“Oh come *on,* who would even care about that?”

“My *job,* that’s who,” Donald growled. “My job that I am going to be late for.”

“Well what about your egg? Just gonna leave them here all day?” She asked. Donald shook his head; he really didn’t understand what was happening.

“Panchito has them today, then José will be awake to take over in the afternoon. We’re having dinner while Panchito’s at work,” Donald recited. “We already wrote a schedule.”

“You always have to have an answer, huh?” Della snapped back at

him.

"Yes? When it comes to a nesting schedule, yeah," he agreed, trying to figure out what her actual point was. He usually didn't have this hard a time interpreting!

Finally he gave up.

"What is this actually about?" He demanded, swinging to look at her directly. Della blinked, like she was startled he was even asking.

"Uh, *duh,* I'm trying to keep you here? At home, with your family?"

"I'm not moving," he pointed out in a tight voice. "I'm trying to go to work. The place I usually go during the day? LP and Scrooge are both doing the same thing?"

"Yeah, but *they're* not having a new kid!" Della exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air. "You've moved down here, you've got a second home basically in New Quackmore, you're dating again, and now you're having a hatchling!"

"I moved weeks ago! And none of that changes anything!"

" *I miss you!"* Della finally burst out. "At least when you were in the pool you were, you know, basically right there. And I know the beach is close, and New Quackmore is closeish, but it isn't the *same,* and you're… you're making a family, Don. I don't know what we're going to do when you're gone."

Her arms shifted to wrap around her torso, and her face flushed. She sniffled.

Donald… he sighed, tried not to groan, rubbing one arm, before he put a hand on Della's shoulder. She looked back up at him through her lashes.

"I'm such a *mess* lately," she grumbled under her breath. Donald laughed.

"I think being trapped on the moon gives you a pass on emotional stability for a bit longer," he told her, and earned a chuckle. "I'm not going anywhere, Del. I'm not making a new family, I'm just adding to *this* one. You're not chasing me out just because I'm having a new baby."

"Besides," he added, waiting until her eyes met his again before continuing, "I think you'll be grateful that Zé and Pancho and I have some space away from all of you."

He wiggled his eyebrows, smirking. Della blinked at him, before her face curdled into a disgusted grimace and she shoved him away, laughing. He let her go, leaning back to cackle.

" *Gross!* Ugh, never mind, you can move far, far away, thanks." But she grinned at him nonetheless.

"That all being said, though…" she said after a moment, "how do you feel about a trip to the Bermuda Triangle-"

Donald shook his head.

“Nope.”

“Aw come on, it’s even a sailing trip!”

“I’m leaving for work.”

“We can bring your boyfriends and everything!”

“Leaving. Can’t hear you.”

“I’ll convince the boys!” She threatened as he reached his car. “You’re weak to their puppy eyes, I’ve seen it!”

Donald hid a grin with one hand as he drove away, shaking his head.

SHUSH headquarters were quiet when Donald arrived. Not worryingly so, but certainly a change from what the last few days had been at home. He made his way to his office, nodding at a few agents that he passed.

“Double Duck! Are you here to see the new recruits?” RN asked him as he walked past her. “Our current group is doing weapons drills with WS downstairs if you want to pop in.”

“If I have time; need to catch up on things. Any news on the major missions this week?” He asked. RN shook her head, which didn’t

surprise him. She was a trainer, not a field agent, so she wouldn't be getting by-the-minute updates.

He waved goodbye and continued on to Ravenson's office. She wanted Paperinik in for some kind of meeting, and he had no idea how to handle that. His best bet was to claim that he couldn't contact him to come in to SHUSH without compromising his identity, then letting Gizmo plan something. He could claim that DD couldn't be present at any such meeting for identity purposes, right? It was all he could come up with, anyway; the only other options were illusions, and there was a huge risk of discovery if he tried.

He also had to touch base with José tonight about another seminar; hopefully he could get a more detailed list of things Ravenson wanted to discuss from her directly first.

Unfortunately for his plans, she wasn't *in* her office, so he went on to his own and dropped his bag before heading to the weapons lab on the lower levels.

The weapons lab had two main areas, storage and testing. While storage was highly secure, the testing area had a number of low security areas for any agents on site to either practice with new weaponry or to spar, as the gyms were attached. There were also several observation areas, which was where Donald was heading; he still didn't know who Ravenson thought he knew of the new recruits, and this was no time to be clumsy with his identity.

A few agents were lingering in the observation area, but for the most part Donald had the room to himself. On the floor below, Agent WS was speaking to a crowd of milling trainees, who were all peering around with clear interest and trying not to be obvious about it.

Donald settled in to observe, making note as each trainee stepped up

to spar first with WS, then with RN and a few other lingering agents on the floor. Keeping in mind the initial reports he'd read, he mentally picked out the clear military recruits, the law enforcement, and the few prior civilians. None could take WS by a mile, but that was hardly a shock. He was older than most of the agents at SHUSH, a grizzled veteran who had been there so long Donald was pretty sure the world would end before he retired. Donald had trained under him, once upon a time.

Another trainee stepped up, a peacock that looked awfully smug for someone facing down WS, and Donald made a note to keep an eye out for that one. Confidence was necessary in this line of work, but arrogance was a death knell in the field. He felt reasonably confident he'd tempered his previous class to a healthy balance, but that didn't mean this group would go as easily.

A *thud* he could feel even through the walls, and the peacock stumbled off the mats with a few bruised feathers and a more bruised ego. He didn't look happy about it.

The next one stepped up, a white duck with hair braided behind her head, half-hidden behind WS's bulk. She settled into a comfortable stance; it looked like a judo stance, but slightly off, like she hadn't learned in a formal setting. The first few moments of the bout solidified that theory; her movements were solid, but they certainly didn't belong to any one martial art.

Then she twisted to throw a haymaker that even Donald would be proud of, and he felt a chill of recognition roll down his spine. He knew that punch. It was *his*.

She dove at WS's ankles and tried to toss him over her shoulder, and he saw her face grit with a strained grin. They both tumbled to the ground, WS recovering first to shove the trainee back to the ground.

Donald didn’t see the rest of the spar, though it lasted a few moments longer than the others had. He only vaguely noticed the trainee being ushered to another match with RN, who was grinning ear to ear as they met on the new mat.

At least he knew why June wasn’t responding to José’s texts, Donald thought to himself with a half-hysterical snort, watching his niece take out RN’s ankles with a leg sweep. Trainees weren’t allowed access to their phones until basic training was complete.

Daisy was going to kill him.

He found Ravenson in another observation area, looking over testing of some new stun gun testing with a mild expression. He took just a moment, before she noticed him, to really look at her.

She was tall, taller than him, and had mottled brown feathers and black hair kept in a short bob. She had a faint scar just below her beak. At times, like now, he thought she looked familiar, but when he tried to place her features, nobody came to mind. Her features themselves weren't familiar, it was more something about her stance, her mannerisms. It itched in the back of his mind at times. But he had to toss the thought aside, as she spotted his approach and turned to face him. As she did, the resemblance faded away.

“Double Duck?”

“Director,” he greeted carefully, glancing back down at the trainees. They were only just visible from this area, and the glare of the blast glass was sharp enough to hide pretty much everything. Ravenson still seemed to see what he was looking at, and nodded.

“Let’s go to my office, there’s something I wish to discuss with you.” So saying, she led the way upstairs, nodding at a few agents that she had been standing with as she went. Donald trailed after.

“First of all, your message?” She asked as the door closed. Donald blinked at her, then grinned, recalling what it had been.

“Did she really say it?” He asked eagerly.

“I’ll assume that was a direct quote then,” she replied while shaking her head in exasperation. “An egg?”

“Magic mishap. We’re waiting for more news on when to expect them to hatch,” Donald replied cheerfully.

“I see. And the… near death?”

“Magic mishap. I’m fine,” Donald repeated, a bit less cheerful. His back itched with new feathers, and his chest ached.

Raenson eyed him with a frown, but after a moment, nodded once and moved on.

“So, the trainee?” She asked. Donald let out a theatrical groan, flopping into the spare chair dramatically. He threw his hand over his face in a faint.

“Well, I don’t think the voice modulator is going to trick her,” he lamented, “seeing as she used to live with me.”

Ravenson's eyebrows rose minutely.

"I wasn't aware you had raised a child prior to the triplets," she observed.

And why, Donald wondered as he eyed her through his fingers, *would* she be aware of anything not in his file?

"Technically it was only part time, and I wasn't raising her, exactly. Just helping with childcare," he said carefully. "Her mom wasn't home as often as she wanted to be, and they were *supposed* to be with their aunt, but, well…"

Their house had had three adults living in it, after all, someone was usually around. Better than an empty house or a stressed Daisy trapped in her small apartment. Donald hadn't minded, even after their final breakup, and the girls certainly didn't care either way. If anything they seemed to *love* being at the cabana, always something happening, always some noise and company. Compared to their nice, quiet house, he could see the preference.

Lord only knew how much *he* preferred the chaos over the Manor.

"Hm. So, your assessment?" Ravenson asked.

"I think she'll make a fantastic agent," he said immediately. "But still should be in the course. Even if that means we have to work around the secret identity thing, it would be doing her a disservice to remove her."

“And her fellow trainees may well notice and read into her absence,” Ravenson mused, nodding. “How much do you trust her acting skills?”

“She’ll have to be a good actor to make it here,” Donald said. “But we should probably give her warning. I’m a bit less confident in her improv.”

She nodded; Donald rose from his sprawl.

“I’ll schedule something, preferably this afternoon, so we don’t have to worry about you two running into each other in the hallway,” she said, and turned to her computer.

“One other thing, since you’re here,” Ravenson said from her desk. Donald paused, having started to get up to leave.

“Your friend Paperinik,” she started, and he winced. “Gizmoduck has offered to try to have him come in. Shall I assume you’ll be unable to attend?”

“Yes,” he said distantly. “I don’t think the disguise will hold up.”

Donald checked his email again. And again. He was waiting for some news about the theater raid. A plan, an assignment, something. It was a sighting of a potential witness to the Blot! Or possibly a conspirator! Why weren’t they going right *now?!*

He sighed. He knew why; she hadn’t been seen *now,* it had already been a few days. It was better to be cautious when they didn’t have a

reason to rush in. That was the SHUSH M.O., move in slow and careful whenever possible, only hurry if there were no other options.

Donald hated it. He knew the policy, he understood it, he *got* it, he really did. But whenever he ran into a brick wall of procedures and rules and safety regulations when there were lives on the line, he missed being a vigilante.

He eyed his 'watch.' Technically, he thought. Technically he was still a vigilante.

Just for this case, of course. He was still mostly retired. He didn't *want* to be active again, he didn't have that kind of time anymore!

But.

But he was technically still a vigilante. For the Blot case. And Mme Rouge was a Blot suspect.

PK: how do either of you feel about a small investigation?

DW: what kind of investigation

PK: a plausibly legal one

PK: only a little breaking and entering

DW: only a little?

PK: its a vacant building neway

Gizmo: that sounds sus

DW: gizmo how old even are you

PK: its hard to explain over text, but its blot related

DW: well what do you know, i think im free!

Gizmo: I want more context first!

Gizmo: can we meet somewhere thats more than JUST plausibly legal?

PK: what kind of vigilante are you?

PK: but fine, sure, I'll host. Tomorrow night?

DW: k

Gizmo: suonds good. And i didnt become a hero to break the law!

A separate text directly from Drake, on his normal phone.

Drake: is it alright if Gos comes to hang with the kids tomorrow tonight? Ive got late plans and LP needs to actually sleep this week

Donald laughed and sent his own update to Bentina. One of the few good things about the boys living in the Manor, not the houseboat, was that he could slip out when he needed to and didn't need to get a babysitter anymore.

Donald: bentina says thats fine. Ill be out so she'lll be in the main manor

Drake: im sure she'll survive a night in a fancy mansion with a ghost butler

Donald: you never know

Drake: the whole ghost thing IS a bit worrying, come to think of it

Donald snorted, shaking his head, and turned back to the shield.

PK: sounds like a you problem

Gizmo: what??

DW: youre a hero that gets paid for it, and you dont break any laws; why not just be a cop?

Gizmo: …

Gizmo: im here to handle problems the police can't. Thats why most of the people I fight are mad scientists

DW: well I'm here to fight crimes the police WONT handle

DW: because theyre too corrupt or too incompetent to do it

Gizmo: im sure theyre trying their best!

PK: sure, sometimes. Sometimes theyre taking money under the table from the beagle boys or the phantom blot to look the other way

PK: we all have different reasons we got into the business

Donald had gotten into it to pull pranks. He chose not to say that part.

DW: well personally my goal was to be able to fight corruption, and being in Mcducks pocket isnt a good look imo

PK: …

PK: is now really the time for this?

Gizmo: look, i get you dont like me, but Mr. McDuck isnt doing anything except paying for the armor!

Gizmo: he's a good man; the whole reason he's funding the armor is because he wants the city to be safe

DW: sure

PK: is NOW really the time for this???

DW: and if you find out he's, idk, committing fraud and paying off the gov to look the other way

DW: youre really going to turn him in? Toss your boss in the slammer?

DW: or are you going to say 'well i can do more good if i keep him out of jail, its for the greater good!'

DW: and look the other way

PK: THIS

PK: IS NOT

PK: THE TIME

PK: FOR THIS!

Gizmo: i would turn him in. i worked for beaks for a bit, remember? Im not excusing one crime to resolve another one

Gizmo: even if that means i lose funding. If i have to stop being gizmoduck because i dont have any money to maintain the armor, so be it

Gizmo: and how do you even arrest people? The police are at least able to be held accountable for what they do, they dont just get to break the law because its easier that way!

Gizmo: how do YOU justify breaking the law to catch someone else doing it?

PK: you two couldnt have this fight somewhere other than a shared chat?

DW: let me know how getting a warrant goes for you next time beaks does anything

DW: bulba certainly had his tracks covered, do you think the cops cared about one little girl reporting her grandfather was kidnapped by the guy?

DW: or lets hear about the blot! Because last time i checked, the guy was bribing half the DPD before PK caught him!

DW: did YOU follow the law to catch him, PK?

Gizmo: i get that it could be necessary! That doesnt mean its the reason i'm a hero!

PK: is now a good time to say that half the crimes i solved were time travel related and technically never happened?

DW: what

Gizmo: what?

PK: oh NOW you two are paying attention

PK: look, you two have different reasons you got into vigilante work

PK: personally i did it to do what i couldnt in my usual life; it wasnt just to break the law, but the things i needed to do to save lives werent legal

PK: so i get that the whole breaking the law thing isnt WHY you got into the business, G, but its not like being a hero is legal in general

PK: even if the cops arent trying to arrest you for it, they COULD, and that might happen at any time

PK: theyll cheer you when you rescue people from a fire or stop the newest nut with a doomsday device

PK: but they can turn on a dime if the public changes their minds, and whether you committed any OTHER crimes wont really matter if they dont want it to matter, you get me? Itll just be fuel on the fire

PK: so im going to ask you both to accept that you both became heroes for different reasons, and you dont have to agree with each other

DW: … fine. But i reserve the right to say i told you so if mcduck ever does go mad with power

Gizmo: i REALLY feel like he would have already if he was going to. Hes just rich, that doesnt make him automatically evil!

DW: well…

PK: I mean, G? mcduck may be corrupt, maybe not, but you should think about what it looks like from everyone elses point of view: he basically has robocop on his personal security team

Gizmo: i can hardly help that he hadn't done anything illegal for me to prove I WOULD arrest him if i had to

DW: you could arrest him anyway

DW: let the cops sort it out later

Gizmo: thats a terrible idea!

DW: it was a joke

Gizmo: oh

DW: im not saying mcduck is committing any crimes. Im just pointing out that IF he was, youre already compromised

DW: im not paid by anyone, so at least nobody can claim im in anyones pocket

Gizmo: wait, how do you even pay for your equipment if youre not getting paid?

Gizmo: it occurs to me that you have really good tech for NOT being paid by a billionaire

Gizmo: and at least my compromises are public, nobody would know if you WERE being paid off by glomgold

DW: how dare you imply i would work for the shark nut

DW: why does anyone work for him

PK: he pays very well, in advance, for any non-standard work like wrangling sharks or sailing to find lost treasures

DW: how do you know that

PK: i got by on hand made things until a friend helped me out, Gizmo, we built most of my equipment in his personal lab

PK: so bsacially my version of gearloose

DW: seriously how do you know that

Gizmo: Darkwing doesnt have that option, how did he get the setup he has???

PK: maybe hes independently wealthy?

DW: i know a guy that helped build a lot of it, and WHY did you work for glomgold?

PK: um, he was hiring?

DW: hes tried to kill mcduck and his family? Like, multiple times?

Gizmo: he's really bad at it though, hes probably the least competent enemy Mr. McDuck has

PK: do you have any idea how many people have tried to kill Scrooge McDuck? How am i supposed to keep track?

DW: seriously?

PK: yes, many people do really want him dead. Including me sometimes, so theres that

DW: i want to study you under a microscope

PK: buy me dinner first

Gizmo: so… tomorrow night? I can bring takeout

DW: youre making it sound like a slumber party

DW: we can braid each others hair

PK: nah, we would need to summon a demon for it to be a slumber party

DW: what?

Gizmo: what???

PK: what

Lunch with Scrooge

Somehow the day was only half over, and Donald decided to allow insanity to take over, so he agreed to meet Scrooge for lunch. Why not. It may be a sign of the apocalypse and all, but at least he would be fed. Besides, he was technically supposed to be avoiding June until they could have a proper meeting, so staying out of the office would make it a bit easier.

He wasn't surprised when the lunch offer transformed into Donald going to eat at the Money Bin; at least Scrooge was buying.

The Bin was buzzing with activity as he walked through the main lobby; not too unusual, given it was the middle of the day, but it meant he got a few odd looks as he walked through.

Which actually gave him pause, as he reached the elevators. He was a duck wearing a suit in the Money Bin. Even if they recognized him from Tweeter, surely Donald Duck visiting his uncle wasn't something worth noticing?

He was so tired of people staring at him.

Thankfully, whatever reason he was gaining attention kept anyone from joining him in the elevator. So he got to ride up alone, staring at the shiny doors and wondering how hard it would be to permanently go to sea. They had a magic portal to the cabana, surely he could make it work?

Ding!

The doors opened. He stepped into the outer lobby for Scrooge's office. It was empty, but he could hear muffled speech coming from the inner office. Gyro, if he was hearing correctly. And… Fenton?

Donald blinked, then glanced down at himself.

He was in his suit. A perfectly nice, normal suit.

That he routinely wore to SHUSH. Where he saw Fenton. Who had, by some bizarre miracle, not realized Donald was Double Duck.

He darted off to the bathroom. Sure, he had been fine with Fenton knowing his spy identity, but *now* it was literally all of them, and he hadn't really considered if he was willing to do that just yet.

In the mirror, he stared, trying to find a reasonable way of turning Double Duck back into Donald. Take the coat off? The tie? Mess up his hair? Whatever he did would have to be reversible, or Donald would be the one walking back into SHUSH this afternoon…

He decided on all three options, tossing his tie into his jacket pocket and throwing the jacket over his arm, running a hand through his hair to muss it up a bit.

He looked back at the mirror. He didn't really… look any different? He still looked like Double Duck, just after a long day. Or maybe he looked like Donald, just better dressed? Had he *ever* had this much trouble separating identities before?

The doors opened, and Donald startled away from the sink, smacking his elbow into the counter for his troubles. He glanced up, fast, but it

wasn't Fenton. It wasn't Gyro, either, it was one of the Buzzards. Not Bradford, Donald had never learned this one's name.

They stared at each other for a moment, before Donald shrugged, nodded politely, and leaned forward to wash his hands. Buzzard peered at him for another moment before slowly shuffling into a stall. Donald made his hasty exit, wondering as he left why Buzzard was even here; they worked at the main office downtown, and if they were having a meeting Scrooge probably wouldn't have invited Donald over in the first place.

Scrooge was standing in the outer lobby when he emerged, still talking to Gyro. Neither of them noticed him, while Fenton waved absently on his way to the elevator, a box full of parts in his arms. Lil' Bulb was sitting on his shoulder; they were arguing. Well, Fenton seemed to be arguing, Lil' Bulb was flickering and gesturing wildly but Donald didn't understand him well enough to know what he was saying.

"No, no, the voltage is just too *high*- oh hi Donald! I heard congrats were in order?" Fenton said, stopping to focus on him. Donald nodded, then blinked, before throwing a suspicious glance at his uncle. Who seemed *more* focused on what he was talking about now, turning away from him entirely.

"Thank you," Donald replied, a grin sneaking across his face. "We're pretty excited! Things have been a bit chaotic trying to get things ready."

He still needed to make a nursery on the houseboat; sure, with the portal door it was a bit redundant, but he didn't want to risk the portal not working, and he wanted a space for the baby near anywhere he was potentially going to be sleeping.

“I’ll bet! You’ll have to tell me the whole story later, but we have to run! Science waits for no-one!” Fenton declared, Lil’ Bulb waving a fist in solidarity (or as a threat?), and they continued to the elevators. Gyro wrapped up what he was saying and joined them, tossing out a shout as the doors closed.

“Congrats! Good job finding a new kid or whatever happened!”

His words echoed a bit as he disappeared, making it very clear what he had said.

Donald turned to his uncle, one eyebrow raised. Scrooge winced, rubbing the back of his head and knocking his hat askew.

“Ach, well, I didn’t- you see, it came up, and…” he floundered, and Donald really wanted to pretend to be mad, but he couldn’t help it, he lost it and started laughing. Scrooge eyed him cautiously, his hands slowly falling back to his sides.

“I don’t mind you telling people,” Donald finally said, wiping a tear from his eye. “Especially Gyro and Fenton, they’re family. Kinda curious *what* you said though.”

Because somehow, he didn’t think Scrooge had told them about the volcano or the shrine. Just a hunch, given their casual attitudes. Well, Gyro would probably be pragmatic about it, since Donald *was* alive and all, but Fenton struck him as someone who would have a stronger reaction to a near-death experience.

Scrooge made a face, gesturing to his office as he spoke. Donald fell in step towards the doors.

“Well, couldn’t rightly say the whole bit, figured that was… well, your choice and all, and I’ll admit I don’t rightly understand how that mess made an egg of all things…” He started; behind them, Donald heard the bathroom door open. He glanced back, but didn’t see Buzzard anywhere. Maybe he’d left something in the conference room and was just using the bathroom before leaving?

“Well, when three birds love each other very much…” Donald’s mouth said while he was still looking behind him, so he didn’t have time to dodge the swat to his shoulder. He snorted a laugh, stumbling into the doorframe.

“Ach, you know what I meant!” Scrooge grumbled, but he was chuckling as he did. “In any case, I just mentioned you three were expectin’ and that you could tell them the details.”

“Gyro said found a kid,” Donald observed.

“Well, you *are* all males, and different species besides,” Scrooge pointed out placidly, “So unless one of you is hiding something, it would either be a surrogate or adoption. He’s just hedging his bets, I would guess.”

“Fair enough,” Donald conceded with a nod. “We haven’t made up a cover story yet, but I’m thinking foundling unless the others have another idea.”

Foundling law allowed for adoption of any abandoned eggs, so long as parents couldn’t be located (or, in the case of cuckoos and some other species, if they had been intentionally abandoned), primarily to ensure eggs weren’t left to freeze during a custody debate, and so whoever did the hatching wouldn’t have a recently imprinted chick removed from them. Donald had no idea what species their egg would hatch into, so it was the easiest path to getting them set up without a

custody question.

Scrooge nodded, looking satisfied.

“Thought that would be the case. Beakley can probably help get the paperwork in, if you want to, er, skip some of the formalities,” he offered magnanimously.

Which meant he thought they would be forging said paperwork, and figured a spy would have better access. True enough, but Donald didn’t need help with that. He only nodded in mild agreement instead of actually saying anything.

Scrooge closed the office doors. Immediately, his shoulder relaxed a bit, which was… odd. The Money Bin was basically Scrooge’s second home; Donald had never seen him anything less than 100% comfortable here, no matter if they were in the Bin itself or one of its many odd rooms.

“Feels like I’ve been getting nothing but interruptions all day,” he muttered as he walked back to the small table in the corner of the room. Donald could remember hundreds of afternoons sitting there doing homework, planning new adventures, even a vague, hazy memory of coloring something or other, feet swinging in the air. He and Della had spent a lot of time here, growing up; Duckworth was nice enough, but he certainly wasn’t picking them up from school or babysitting, so they’d had to either be with Scrooge or old enough to be left alone.

Della had preferred chasing Quackfaster through the stacks, ‘helping’ put things away while keeping her sparring skills up to par. Or she would be sitting on Scrooge’s desk, begging him to leave work and go sasquatch hunting in the woods instead. Sometimes she and Donald would plan elaborate pranks, whispering and plotting in the dark

conference room while Scrooge pretended he had no idea they weren't still in the office.

Now, the table was set with… Happy Hippo burgers?

Donald eyed his uncle, who had plopped into one of the seats and was already digging in one of the bags. Scrooge caught his glance, shrugged.

"I asked Launchpad to grab us something to eat so we could have some privacy instead of going to the canteen," he explained. "This is what he came back with. Swore by the place, so we'll see if it's any good."

Donald sat down more slowly, picking through the other bag. Burger, fries, soda. There was a bag of two cookies at the bottom, clearly broken, but at least contained.

"Don't remember the last time I ate here," Donald admitted, picking up a fry. "The boys weren't big fans, and eating out wasn't much faster than just cooking it myself anyway."

"Suppose feeding four was a bit of a hassle either way," Scrooge replied, eyes on his burger. He was attempting to squeeze every single drop of ketchup out of the tiny packet with almost surgical precision.

Donald wondered if he even *liked* ketchup, or if he just felt the need to not waste it.

"Yes and no," Donald answered. "I like cooking, and usually at least one of the boys was happy to help or at least keep me company, so it

was a nice way to end the day."

It had reminded him of sitting in the kitchen with Grandma Duck, peeling potatoes for soup or apples for a pie. The kitchen *smelled* warm, and it felt like home. He liked to think his own kitchen was like that.

"Huey, I'm guessing? Dewey doesn't strike me as patient enough," Scrooge said, now adding mustard from yet another packet. Happy Hippo didn't even carry mustard, had he just *had* that already?

"You'd be surprised," Donald replied with a chuckle. "Dewey likes to experiment, so if I'm willing to let him go nuts he's happy to make dinner. Whether it's *edible* is another story…" He recalled the barbecue fried pizza thing; it had *lingered.*

"Huey likes to be helpful, and he likes prep work more than the actual cooking itself," Donald added thoughtfully, chewing on a fry. "Give him a chopping board and plenty of time, and he'll chop perfectly sized potatoes for an army."

"Louie in that kitchen of yours? Or was he more of an observer?" Scrooge asked, tilting his head up curiously.

"Louie likes to bake, but only if he's got something to watch at the same time," Donald answered honestly.

"Baking, really?" Scrooge said, leaning back in surprise.

"Sure; it's mostly a waiting game, and he gets fresh baked cookies out of it. Win win," Donald replied easily. Louie would work on a recipe

for *hours* so long as most of those hours were waiting. Cookies, fresh bread for a while until he complained his arms got too sore, even pie if Huey helped prep.

"Huh," Scrooge said thoughtfully, going back to his food. "They don't get up to much cooking at the Manor."

"Bentina made it pretty clear she considers the kitchen exclusively hers, so they need to get permission first," Donald said through a mouthful of burger. "Louie doesn't like to rock the boat and actually *ask,* he usually just gets in a mood and wanders in to see what's in the pantry to work with. He comes to the houseboat once in a while."

His rule was they needed permission for anything new, but if it was something they had done before, like just turning on the oven or using the mixer, they were fine. The only time it had been an issue was when Huey had been *determined* to make correct macarons, and ended up using all the eggs for breakfast. Well, the whites anyway, there had been plenty of yolks after it was all over.

Personally Donald had thought they were *all* fine, but Huey could get into his own head sometimes about perfection.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, Scrooge making faces at his pop before grimacing and taking another sip over and over again.

"You could let it go flat, if the bubbles are bugging you," Donald suggested eventually, but Scrooge shook his head.

"It's just too *sweet.* How you lads can stand the stuff is beyond me, I'll take my tea over this any day," he insisted, continuing to drink it. Donald shrugged.

“Guess it’s an acquired taste,” he replied easily.

More silence. Donald finished his food and gathered up the garbage.

“Ah, do you have to head out right away?” Scrooge asked, still picking at his fries. He was eating remarkably slow, for him. Inefficient.

Stalling.

“No?” Donald answered. “To be honest, I don’t have anything pressing this afternoon. Just a meeting, then more paperwork that I missed.”

He was planning a hero raid tomorrow, sure, but that wasn’t at work. And he needed to come up with a method of getting PK to SHUSH without compromising his identities. Help plan José’s next session, that they could hopefully work on tonight… He should go in and work out the timing for the Tibet mission he and 330 would be on next week, but since they were on the other end of the world, he’d be making that call in the middle of the night anyway…

Regardless, he didn’t need to be back at SHUSH specifically for those things. And avoiding being seen by June for the moment was the best plan he had to deal with that particular issue, so…

“Really?” Scrooge demanded, eyes narrowed, before he visibly backed down. “Er, you just seemed so eager to get back, I was thinking you were swamped, or getting heat from your boss.”

That… sounded almost rehearsed. Like Scrooge had studied up on

how normal people talked about their jobs. Donald found himself delighted, if a bit surprised. Why would Scrooge put in that kind of effort?

"My boss was pretty understanding of the whole situation," Donald answered carefully, always carefully, he almost wished he *had* told Scrooge where he worked. "I was able to catch up on most of the things I missed easily enough, I'm between classes right now so I'm helping on other projects."

Scrooge nodded, slowly, thoughtfully, as he carefully scooped up the remainder of ketchup and salt on the burger wrapper with a lone fry.

"You know, I can't recall you saying where you worked, exactly. Some corporate office that flies you around to train their staff?" Scrooge observed, still looking at his food. "Interesting occupation, that."

"It's a niche subject," Donald replied as casually as he could. "So they're willing to send me around instead of trying to get someone else to do it locally."

"What niche would that be?"

"Confidential," Donald answered easier, because it *was* true, and he was hoping it would get him out of more details. Scrooge eyed him from under his brows.

"How'd you get it? Last the boys knew you were picking up accounting gigs," he asked. Donald felt a small trickle of unease trailing down his spine.

Scrooge didn't care what he did. He had *never* cared, so long as Donald was working *somewhere,* no lazy kids banking on an inheritance in his household! Della did air shows and had her adventure profits to bank on, Donald had a job, Scrooge didn't mind either way, but they needed to be doing something with their time. But the details had never been a concern.

"I was recruited, actually," Donald answered. "I worked for them back in college, in a lower position, and the new boss reached out and asked if I would come back. Better pay than accounting was getting me, so it was worth the change."

"Just like that, huh?" Scrooge asked, still pretending to be occupied with his work. It was a trick he'd employed when they were kids; look away, appear distracted or disinterested and Donald would talk more. Tune in when he wanted to put on the pressure, tune out when he wanted them to relax. As a teenager, it had been pretty effective. As an adult, he could see it coming and still felt compelled to answer.

"They've reached out a few times over the years," Donald clarified, "but the travel made it a no-go with the boys. Plus there's times I've had to stay late or go in pretty early, and I might end up working weekends too, every once in a while. Paid well for it, but not an option raising little kids."

All of which had the benefit of being completely true, Donald thought to himself, sitting back down so Scrooge couldn't continue giving him that look. Like he was almost disappointed in Donald's answers, disappointed and hurt.

Donald was immune to the disappointment, mostly. The hurt was new.

"You had some high paying job lined up and didn't take it so you

could be home with the boys?" Scrooge asked, but it was clearly rhetorical, Scrooge was already nodding to himself. "Ach, no, that does make sense. You waited until you knew they had someone at home even if you weren't."

When he put it like that, yeah, that was exactly what had happened, Donald realized. He'd quit when he'd traveled with the Cabs, sure, but they'd known that their sailing up and down the coast would end sometime, it hadn't been their life plan. When they had settled, Donald would probably have considered taking up another gig; it had only been Hooter's insistence on Donald returning after he took in the boys that his opinion had truly soured.

"Suppose I did," Donald agreed, marveling at that realization. How fast he'd really moved to go back to his own adventures, as soon as his kids were safe. What an odd thought.

It also made him want to laugh, realizing it sounded like he'd sacrificed his career for his kids. It was true, sure, but the career being spy work put it in a different light that what Scrooge had to be thinking.

His phone went off. Donald glanced at Scrooge, still picking at every crumb on the wrapper, and opened his email.

ALERT: To all Agents assigned to projects FL 212 or PBL E 19 -

Santiago Acosta has been found dead, apparently by gunshot, as of 1:32 AM local time in his vacation home in Alajuela, Costa Rica. He appears to have been deceased for some time; there have been no confirmed timelines provided by local law enforcement.

His assistant, Lucas (Luke) Alvarez, is currently missing and considered the

prime suspect. His belongings were not located in the home or any surrounding properties, and as of this message no contact has been made with him either by law enforcement officers or his friends or family.

While the murder is still under investigation, it has been confirmed that the safe in the house was opened and emptied, and a number of records appear to have been removed from the home, based on interviews with the staff who confirmed several boxes and files are no longer on the premises. The prevailing theory being brought forward is that Alvarez killed his employer to steal both valuables and records, possibly with a motive to blackmail or extort Acosta's business partners.

Updates will be sent as available and based on security clearance.

"Donald?"

Some dark, grim part of his mind noted that it was surprising it had taken this long for Acosta to be removed. He'd clearly been a patsy for whoever wanted the auction to go forward, Alvarez maybe?

But if Alvarez had just been the brains the entire time, why kill the cash cow? Nobody had been openly investigating Acosta, SHUSH had made sure of it so they could move on the auction buyers first. Now he was on the run with a lot of heat on his back; surely keeping Acosta alive would have been more beneficial in the long run?

Unless Alvarez was also a patsy in this, for someone more in the shadows that had some other motive for cleaning house.

A patsy, or a fall guy.

“Donald, are you- did something happen?”

Alert: Update

Clearance level: Alpha

Team leader: Agent C4

A team will be assigned to investigate the murder; agents to be assigned shortly. All agents with appropriate clearance and experience to verify availability for emergency mission deployment.

“Donald!”

Donald jumped, clutching his phone until the plastic creaked, looking up. Scrooge was peering at him with clear concern, which faded to annoyance as Donald tuned back in.

“What in blazes is so important on that blasted thing?” He demanded, reaching for Donald’s phone. Donald swatted his hand away, shoving it into his pocket before Scrooge could make a second attempt.

“Work thing,” Donald replied harshly, taking a breath. A man was dead. He’d been a creep and was running an illegal weapons auction under his house, and he was dead. Probably two men were dead, honestly; he really doubted that Alvarez had gone on the run. Even if that had happened initially, he was a dead man walking if his plan was blackmail. The people that attended weapons auctions didn’t tend to be the kind to pay out extortion money.

“You went paler than a corpse, that must be some work thing,” Scrooge argued, still eyeing Donald’s pockets like he was debating trying for the phone again.

“It is.” Donald said, rubbing his face. “Someone died.”

He probably shouldn’t have said that. It invited *far* too many questions. But he was tired, and lying to Scrooge took more effort than he had time or energy for.

Why hadn’t he told Scrooge where he worked, again? Scrooge had worked for SHUSH before, he would understand more than most…

But the idea of telling him made his skin crawl, even if he couldn’t quite say why. The idea of Scrooge knowing his secrets shouldn’t be a bad thing, if anything it would make keeping those secrets from the kids easier with another adult to cover for him, and Scrooge would *get* it when he explained why he had to take work so seriously, but…

But. Donald couldn’t get it out of his beak.

“Wha- what?!” Scrooge blustered, falling back into his seat in shock. Donald peered at him through his bangs, still rubbing his temple.

“Are you- was it someone you…” Scrooge continued, and right, the average office job didn’t usually see people dying as a standard event.

“No, nobody I knew,” Donald sighed. “Nobody that works for us either; they’re part of the… embezzlement thing I mentioned a while back. Or were, at least.”

Alvarez had objectively been a criminal, involved with the illegal arms trade essentially, and living off the proceeds in the lap of luxury. He was also the victim of violent crime, possibly at the hands of a friend. Donald felt some sympathy, but not as much as he probably should. A better man would probably feel properly saddened that someone was dead.

It was hard to feel bad when one enemy killed another, but Alvarez had been a tiny fish in a large pond, he hadn't really been someone Donald *wanted* to see gone. That was reserved for people that were a proper threat.

The Blot, Donald would dance at his funeral. But Alvarez? He was barely a blip on the radar.

Though he had been a drunken creep, Donald recalled with a scowl, feeling his sympathy wane. There was also that factor, and not everyone had Donald to get them out of the situation.

Scrooge was watching him with a frown.

"Not that cut up about it?" He asked. Donald forced himself back into the present, but honestly hadn't the faintest *clue* how to answer.

"I have no idea how to feel, honestly. He was an asshole, we think he was committing some pretty hefty crimes, and now he's dead. I… it's weird."

Whatever reaction Scrooge would have to *that,* Donald didn't know, because his phone went off again, several times in rapid succession, and he pulled it back out to check.

From: Director Ravenson

CC: Agent 330

Double Duck,

I have a team being assigned to Costa Rica. You and 330 are not officially assigned to the investigation, as your other mission is intended to be your priority. However, if you want a slot in the group, I will arrange it.

From: Agent C4

Agent DD,

I'm aware you have another mission assigned to you, so you may not have capacity. However, your credentials as an infiltration agent are some of the best in the agency and I would be remiss to not ask you to take the assignment. Please advise if you will be available to join; I will be taking point at base, you are my top choice for field lead.

-Agent C4

And a double text to top it all off:

Morgana Macawber: We've spread the word of the situation and are running consistent check ins, so there won't be any disappearances without

someone knowing.

Morgana Macawber: I ought to warn you, there are some rumors of a plot of sorts. For the Phantom Blot. I haven't heard anything concrete, but I'm hearing that some folks want to be more proactive this time

Professional Menace

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Donald shoved his phone away, breathing through his nose harshly. That was… a lot to take in in rapid succession. *C4* wanted him on the mission? What was this about a plot?

"Donald?"

"Please don't ask me anything about that," Donald hissed through his teeth, rubbing his eyes. "I really don't want to think about it right now."

Scrooge didn't seem to know how to react, exactly, and responded by coughing into his hand and asking about what their nursery looked like so far, and could he drop by the Manor and take a look at what they had set up? He'd had some available furniture already and all, and he'd sent some along to the cabana, but he'd been able to make some progress at the Manor as well… So Donald spent the afternoon talking about what paint color ("they'll be a baby, Scrooge, just pick something neutral.") and did he think they should have a family portrait done right after they hatched, or wait until they fledged?

Donald thought they were beyond past due for one with Scrooge even *in* it, not to mention Della, and they had their extended family… he had no idea who all Scrooge wanted in it, but they should just book a day so they could take the hundred different shots they would need to cover everyone.

Maybe double that, their family being what it was, the house would probably be invaded by some fleshy monsters the day they tried to take it.

He could call in Goofy…

"Ach, before I forget, I have a favor to ask of you," Scrooge added as Donald was tugging his tie and jacket back on. He didn't even bother fixing his hair.

"A favor?" Donald asked dubiously. Because he did *not* have time for one of Scrooge's favors.

"Nothing strenuous, don't make that face," Scrooge grumbled. "The Board convinced me to have some investor party, a way to charm shareholders and whatnot. Giant waste of time, but the Buzzards insist, and, well, if they think it's worth *spending* money… Wanted to know if your band was interested in playing. Can't have a party without music, after all."

What.

"What?" Donald squawked, spinning to stare at his uncle in shock. "You actually *want* me to play music? While you can actually hear me?"

Donald was perfectly confident in his musical abilities, and José and Panchito were both extremely talented, he loved to play with them, but *Scrooge* wanting to listen to them?

How many signs of the apocalypse were they up to now? He was starting to worry he should be keeping track.

“I mean, it’s all just noise to me,” Scrooge insisted, “but I can admit most people think you sound fine. Or, well, good, at least to some. And I know you three, so I thought it’d be easier to get you to lend a hand.”

Donald’s eyes narrowed.

“Are you offering to pay us? Cause I don’t know if the others are willing to do it for free,” he warned. They would probably be fine doing it for a personal party favor, but a huge event for McDuck Industries would be asking a bit much.

Scrooge’s face twisted in irritation.

“We have a- party budget,” he bit out, like each word was painful, “I’m sure we can come to some kind of agreement.”

Donald couldn’t tell if he was annoyed at the idea of paying *them* or paying in general, so ignored it entirely and nodded.

“I’ll ask the others and let you know. When is this party?” He asked.

“Not for a few weeks,” Scrooge said easily, like that wouldn’t be a ridiculous turn around for most people. “Just let me know as soon as you can so I can make some alternate arrangements if you can’t.”

“Sure,” Donald agreed. There was a non-zero chance this was a hallucination, or that the party would be canceled due to brimstone raining from the sky, so why not?

Scrooge offered to walk him out, continuing the debate on portraits as they came down the elevator.

"A shot of just the kids would be nice," Donald agreed. "Do you think we can get Bentina in one of the family shots?"

"Aye, if we ask nicely, I think we can get her in," Scrooge replied. "Been meaning to ask, do you always call her Bentina?"

Donald glanced over, eyebrow raised.

"Yes? Why wouldn't I use her name?"

"Eh, Della calls her Mrs. B, same as the boys, got me wondering is all," Scrooge said casually, hands twisting slightly on his cane. Donald shrugged.

"We're both adults, I don't feel like I need to call her Mrs. anything," he said simply. It had honestly never occurred to him to do so. "Maybe it would be different if she'd been around when we were kids, calling Duckworth anything else sounds weird, but as it is…" He shrugged again. Della called her Mrs. B, sure, but he was pretty sure that was because the kids did.

Scrooge nodded.

"Aye, that makes sense. Just caught my ear the other day, got wondering. You two are friends, then?"

“Yeah. I would say so, at least,” Donald replied. “She’s basically family, so…”

“So she is!” Scrooge agreed. Their elevator slowed, stopped. Donald glanced at the screen, but it said they were still on the 17th floor.

The doors opened, revealing a few employees that Donald didn’t recognize. They started to step inside, blinked, all looking at Scrooge with wide eyes and rapidly paling faces.

“Er, we can wait for the next one!” One woman offered stepping back and herding the others with one arm. Donald stifled a snort of laughter at her panic, and said nothing.

“Nonsense, no need for that! There’s plenty of room, here Donald, move over-” Scrooge insisted, tugging on Donald’s arm until they were pressed together in the corner. Donald let himself be tugged, rolling his eyes.

“I’m capable of using my own feet,” he pointed out, watching the small group’s faces twist in confusion as he spoke. They hesitantly stepped inside, not pressing any buttons.

“Then why didn’t you?” Scrooge replied with a huff. Donald responded by leaning more of his weight on his uncle, making the old man stagger as the elevator started moving again. “Ach Donald, would you quit that?!”

“No,” he replied cheerfully, but he did pull back enough that they weren’t in danger of falling to the floor.

“Blast it, you’re supposed to be an adult,” Scrooge grumbled to himself, tugging his lapels into order. “You’re acting like those kids of yours.”

Donald ignored him, leaning against the wall and closing his eyes with a chuckle. He didn’t want to continue their conversation with witnesses, even if they would only pick up on half the conversation, and Scrooge seemed to agree. So it was a tense, silent elevator.

“Er… sir? Um, not sure if you know this, you probably do, but… there’s a commotion happening in the lobby,” a younger cat said, letting out a ‘ *meep!’* when both Donald and Scrooge turned to look at him.

“Commotion? What kind of commotion?” Scrooge demanded. The cat held out their phone.

Donald, peering over Scrooge’s shoulder, saw it was some new Tweeter post about Mark Beaks, and almost let out a scream, but reminded himself a crowded elevator was the *last* possible place he should be doing so.

Hopefully Beaks was here for some kind of business reason, not chasing Donald again; how would he have known Donald was even *here?* Donald had taken to checking his car for trackers and hadn’t seen any new ones, and it wasn’t like he usually came to the Money Bin!

Scrooge squinted at the screen, frowning. Donald half expected him to try and take it to look at it better.

“Beaks is in the lobby?” Scrooge finally asked, looking back up. The cat nodded, looking relieved.

“Yes sir! Um, security probably has it in hand and all, they’re professionals, but…” and here he glanced at Donald. “Um, I thought you might want a warning. If you were looking for a quiet exit.”

Oh.

Huh.

Donald glanced at the elevator screen; they were on the fourth floor now. He could get off here, take the stairs down, and never even stop at the lobby. He looked back to Scrooge, who eyed the phone screen again with an expression of disgust.

“Aye, Donald, why don’t you hop off? I’ll have a chat with the interloper. Will you be coming by the Manor before dinner?” Scrooge asked with a dangerous smirk. Clearly Donald wasn’t the only one that wanted to give Beaks some well-deserved karma.

“I can drop by,” he agreed; he was intensely curious what Scrooge was planning, if he was being honest. Not enough to stick around and watch, but enough so that he wanted to hear the story later.

“Good, now off you get!”

Donald tossed a thanks to the cat on his way out, then sighed and started down the stairs. At least they weren’t at the top of the Bin.

The floors he passed were quiet, which was unusual. The Bin did have standard offices, but most of the building was devoted to the weirder aspects of McDuck Industries; Research and Development being the main focus of the building. So usually these were labs, working to create or improve on their various products, mostly Gyro's less extreme inventions.

Labs, Donald thought, were rarely quiet. He took a moment to poke his beak through the doorway, but didn't see anyone, or anything, of note.

He considered the nervous employees on the elevator, and, pausing in the stairwell, pulled out his phone.

The red number next to his Tweeter app was appalling, but he opened it anyway. And there it was, right in Trending, was *#markbeaks* and *#beaksversusmcduckFIGHT*. Great. Awesome. He didn't want to look, but clearly he didn't get a choice. So with a sigh, he started scrolling.

A few people posting that Beaks was leaving Waddle, waving at cameras and tapping away on his phone. Beaks posting now, getting into the helicopter he apparently took over. Landing on the *bridge* to the island, traffic getting stopped in both directions, what an *ass,* striding to the main doors. Talking to the camera about 'chatting with McDuck' and 'clearing the air.'

Making a complete idiot of himself in the Money Bin lobby, insisting he should be allowed up to the top floor and not taking it well when the receptionist told him Scrooge was booked for the afternoon (... had Scrooge set aside the entire afternoon for lunch? Or was he just trying to get some quiet?). Beaks making a stink in another post, saying that 'McDuck is just too scared to come down and talk!' He still didn't say what he wanted to talk about, so Donald worked backwards to before he'd left Waddle to try and get more details.

Best he could find, Beaks had been chatting with, or at least reading posts from, several fans of his who were confidently asserting Beaks was the brightest inventor in the industry, he deserved the richest person in the world title and McDuck ought to retire already, he was old news. Beaks responding with jokes that McDuck would probably challenge him to pistols at dawn instead of any kind of intellectual fight. More back and forth, before a few people pointed out that McDuck had been running the company longer than Beaks had been *alive,* and he seemed to be doing just fine, given he'd wiped the floor with Glomgold in their last competition.

A reminder that McDuck had won, but *Louie* Duck had been the nail in the coffin when Glomgold stole assets from his allies, including Beaks himself. This one had been upvoted heavily, but was buried in the mess; Donald only spotted it because he'd caught Louie's name.

Several people arguing that that move by Beaks had actually been brilliant because of 'incomprehensible technobabble,' from what Donald could parse, an equal number ranting about Glomgold being a conman.

Finally, finally, someone wondering if Beaks could win the richest competition with McDuck alone, since clearly Glomgold was the reason they had failed in the team effort, and if Glomgold could get *that* close, surely Mark Beaks could actually win?

And there it was. Beaks had taken off a short time later, his online fans cheering him on. Donald felt reasonably sure that if he looked, he could find more people judging his choices, but he didn't care enough to go snooping further.

So Beaks was here to bug Scrooge, not to follow Donald, that was… something, at least. He didn't regret taking the stairs, certainly, but it took the slightest edge off.

He continued down to the parking garage, noticing a surprising crowd here. In the lobby, sure, why not watch the chaos, but the parking ramp? It wasn't like they could see anything from the main building. Donald moved closer, trying unobtrusively to see if there was something he'd missed, maybe graffiti? But he couldn't find anything of interest besides small pods of chatting people.

Noticing his confusion, a nearby employee explained: "Beaks parked that helicopter in the middle of the bridge, so nobody can leave. Cars are backed up all the way to the entrance."

Welp. Perfect. Beaks had managed to screw up his afternoon without even knowing he was *there.* Excellent.

Donald grumbled to himself as he walked to his car, fussing with his tie. He *could* head back inside, maybe visit the labs. It wasn't like he needed to rush back (except he needed to talk to C4 about the mission, and he needed to talk to 330 about it as well, and they still needed to handle the June situation, and…), and if he literally couldn't get out anyway…

Unbidden, his eyes drifted to his glove compartment. Which he still hadn't emptied out.

No, it was a stupid idea.

He was retired!

This wasn't an act of heroism that only he could do! This was being a public *nuisance* to bother an enemy! Beaks wasn't even a threat!

He was just *annoying*.

… fuck it.

He reached in and grabbed the spare Paperinik uniform.

Getting out of the parking ramp without being seen? Easy. He knew every hidden corner of this place, including the cameras. It wasn't the first time PK had snuck out of this building. Or into it.

Moving up the bridge to the parked helicopter? Simple. He swung along the struts under the bridge until he reached where it was stalled, twisting so it wasn't clear which direction he'd come from.

He peered over the guardrail. There were stopped cars in both directions, mostly coming from the Bin, with people leaning out their windows to chat or having left the car entirely. Most were annoyed, some amused.

Nobody was guarding the helicopter. Nobody was even really looking at it, just gesturing towards it in clear exasperation on occasion. There was a police car slowly making its way in from the city side of the bridge, but they were having trouble getting through the crowd. Donald didn't think it would make much difference anyway; you could hardly *tow* a helicopter parked illegally.

You could, however, fly it.

He swung up and over the railing. Nobody was looking in his direction, so he didn't bother to rush, strolling cheerfully over to the

thing.

It was a personal helicopter, sized for only one person, which explained why there was nobody guarding it.

And… yup. There were the keys, sitting in the seat, door wide open. There was a pigeon perched on the roof of it that gave him an irritated glance as he reached said door, flying off with a flurry of feathers.

“Wha- Paperinik?! What are you doing!” A shout. Tone meant that was probably the cop.

He plopped into the driver’s seat.

Flying the helicopter?

Donald grinned. Della may be the pilot, but this, he could do.

Somewhere deep in his memory, Normandy grinned at him from the pilot’s seat of a different helicopter, in a different time and place, pointing out varying controls and joking, “I trust you to learn how to fly this thing more than I trust anyone else to back me up on this mission, so pay attention!”

Back in the present, the cop shouted again.

“Just returning this bird to its owner!” He called, snatching a pair of safety earmuffs and starting the engine.

“Paperinik!” He saw the mouth move, but could no longer hear anything, so he gave a cheerful wink and began liftoff. The wind was strong enough to force the officer a few steps backwards, clutching his hat. He looked like Donald had just slapped him with a fish.

The crowd was watching him as he took off; he waved with a smirk, and a few waved back with wide smiles of their own. There was a kid standing on the sidewalk watching him with wide, wide eyes, giggling when he winked at them.

Behind the crowd, the doors to the Money Bin burst open, Beaks standing there with a look of comical surprise. Donald waved at him too, before he turned and took off towards Waddle Inc. in the middle of downtown.

Up in the air, he smiled. Flying wasn’t quite his thing usually, but he did like to feel the wind in his hair. And in this case, his cape, though his hat was holding on for dear life, pinned by the earmuffs and nothing else. The city looked nice from above, and off to the west was the sea and the sun hovering well above the horizon.

He admired the view for a moment as he banked. The glittering waves, the puffy white clouds, Gizmoduck shooting towards him at a rapid pace…

Well, that last one wasn’t great. Though Gizmoduck was at least nice to look at, armor shining in the sunlight, face struck in heroic disapproval. He had the look of a hero down, Donald should tell him that sometime.

He was clearly saying *something,* but obviously Donald couldn’t hear him, so he had no idea why Gizmo was bothering. Donald shrugged,

gesturing to his ears, and turned back to flying, humming to himself. Gizmo huffed in the corner of his eye, looking around like he expected someone else to be there with him, flying next to him as he navigated around a few other taller buildings.

He and his new companion flew side by side until, finally, they reached the Waddle building, Donald angling for the rooftop landing pad. It was deserted, thankfully, as he landed the copter while Gizmoduck scowled at him. Fantastic expression of disapproval. Really reminded Donald of his own grandmother.

“You stole a helicopter!” He shouted the moment Donald tossed the headphones off. Donald shot him a quizzical look.

“Did I?” He asked casually, leaning against the side of said bird. “Doesn’t sound like me.”

“Oh?” Gizmo asked maniacally. “Where did you get the one you’re *leaning against?!”*

Donald took a moment to look back at it. Squinted a bit, tilted his head back and forth.

“This one?” He asked, pointing a thumb at it.

“ *Yes!”* Gizmo yelled, throwing up his hands.

“I found this abandoned in the middle of a bridge. It was blocking traffic,” Donald explained innocently.

“So you *stole it?!”*

“No.”

“No. No, of course not,” Gizmo laughed, rubbing his face. Donald felt a bit bad, honestly. A smidge. “Why, did you say ‘dibs’ first?”

“Gizmo,” Donald said, almost kindly. “Whose helicopter is it?”

“Mark Beaks,” Gizmo answered dully, face twisted in distaste.

“And what building are we standing on?”

“Ah- Waddle Inc.?” He said, a bit more aware, glancing around. Then a look of dawning comprehension crossed his face. Not joyful comprehension, more of the exasperation of someone reacting to a bad pun.

“So, from where I’m standing, I *returned* an *abandoned* helicopter to its owner, after they left it in the middle of a bridge,” Donald explained with a pleased smile. Gizmo groaned, eyeing him from under the visor.

“And the fact that he was clearly still in the Money Bin and has no ride home now?” Gizmoduck asked him, but he looked to be fighting a smile, so Donald had clearly won this. He shrugged casually.

“He should have parked somewhere he wouldn’t get towed,” Donald replied. Gizmo laughed, clearly despite himself.

“Towed, huh?”

Donald shrugged again.

“It’s not like an actual tow truck could have moved it. Besides, I think I was being nice,” he said.

“Nice?”

“I could have put it on top of the Money Bin. Can you imagine McDuck letting him up there to grab it?” Donald asked, and finally got a proper laugh from Gizmo.

“No, I guess not. Uh, so… need a ride back to your base?” He offered.

Donald paused.

He maybe, possibly, hadn’t thought this all the way through. Paperinik had no reason to go back to the Money Bin, but Donald couldn’t really get away without going back for his car. Even if he went to Ducklair Tower to grab a spare suit, walked to work (or maybe took the 313 out of storage, wouldn’t *that* be fun!), he’d have to get back to the Bin or risk someone asking why his car was still there.

And asking anyone *else* to move the car would invite the same question of why Donald didn’t have it, how he’d left without it, why was his suit was sitting in the backseat… Drake he could ask, he at least knew Donald’s identity already, but he didn’t live close enough,

and nobody with Bin access knew about Paperinik.

Ah, the hazards of a secret identity. But if he was risking things either way…

“Actually, could you take me somewhere else?”

Gizmo didn’t understand why Donald wanted to be dropped at the pier, but let him down without questioning him too heavily. Donald waited until the fellow hero had flown off, presumably to boot Beaks from the Bin if he was still there, then made his way up the craggy shoreline until he was certain he wasn’t going to be seen.

Then he dove into the water and let the ocean flow over him, let that power run through his veins and feathers until he was able to shoot through the water, barely impeded by the waves, salt on his tongue. Up the coast, around the rocks, avoid the windows of the lab until he was dragging himself up the cliffside back of the Money Bin, a hasty illusion thrown over him so nobody would look twice. Not the kind of thing that would hold up to close scrutiny, but if nobody was expecting to see someone climbing the rocks there would be nothing to see.

Back into the garage, another quick spell to dry off, slipping into his backseat to change, and he was off.

On the bridge, traffic had moved on, but the cop was still there, clearly trying not to laugh in Mark Beaks face while the bird clearly complained about *something*.

Donald couldn’t imagine what.

Gizmoduck was also there, arms crossed. They were standing off to the side, and didn't notice Donald drive by. He did hope that he hadn't made trouble for his friend, though he had to admit he probably had.

That being said, he couldn't *wait* to talk to Scrooge tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Normandy the Navy OC borrowed from my buddy leaden and their fic 'Life Was Easier When I Only Cared About Me.' Go check it out!

https://archiveofourown.org/works/50222005/chapters/126845221

Interlude: Imitation is the Sincerest form of Flattery

“Trainee N1J? Can you come with me, please?” An agent, a tall rooster, called into the training room at large, waiting by the door. June paused, making sure she had heard her own new code name, before setting aside her dumbbells and walking towards the door.

Her fellow trainees watched her without watching as she walked. They’d been through a lot together so far; basic combat training, code breaking, hacking, dealing with those 3 AM burritos because *wow* the food on base was bad…

But they were still training to be spies, and June felt her hackles rise as she crossed the room, forcing her spine to straighten and her eyes to stay forward. She saw nothing. It was just her, the door, and the agent standing there asking her to join him.

They were just watching because it was unexpected. Nobody had been summoned from the group separately so far; any time they’d received a private summons or smaller group, they'd gotten the details via email. But for the last few weeks of their training, they were completely cut off from phones, laptops, any form of communication. So it wasn’t odd that someone had to come in person; it was just because it had *only* been her thus far.

Agent RN said losing all their forms of communication was for security, but hadn’t gone into further details. June assumed it was because they were finally getting into the more secretive parts of the organization; they hadn’t even known it was SHUSH until that point. So if they found a security issue with someone, that person couldn’t just post all the details on their Instagull before SHUSH could deal with them. All she knew for *sure,* though, was how annoying it was not to be able to check in with everyone.

Which was hilarious, because they hadn't *been* in close contact. April had been studying with Merlin for the last two years, and the phone signal was iffy, to say the least, in Arthur's castle. Their mom was as busy as she always was, Aunt Daisy was making a name in the fashion industry, Uncle Donald was raising his nephews and stuck in Duckburg, the other Cabs back in their home countries…

May was busy traveling with her MMA circuit, and June… June had been drifting, if she was being honest. Getting random jobs to make ends meet, trying hobbies and projects and desperately seeking out the same kind of passion her sisters had in their chosen paths.

Then she'd been messing with Rockerduck Industries, found some evidence of environmental damage and decided to get it *all* and dump it online, only to run into a secret agent of all people doing the same thing.

She'd expected to get arrested, honestly. She'd been on the east coast at the time, miles and miles from anyone she knew, wondering how badly Uncle Donald was going to kill her for this, because he was still her best bet for posting bail, when the agent asked if she was looking for a job instead.

June really owed Agent 27 a lot; apparently she'd gone to bat for June with her superiors, insisting that June was exactly the kind of trainee they should be recruiting. 27 hadn't been able to see her after she started basic, but she'd told her to reach out when she was done with her training; 27 had been *that* confident in her.

June didn't want to disappoint her. Which was making her all the more nervous as she approached the agent who had summoned her, thinking about all the things that could be wrong. Had her background check come back with something? Had some other agent said that her criminal history was too much to accept? She'd heard the Director usually worked from this base, which made her all kinds of nervous.

It was *stupid,* surely those concerns would have come up *before* she got to this stage, but she felt like she was getting called to the Principal's office.

She reached the doors. It felt like she'd run a marathon, like the room had kept growing with each step, but it couldn't have been more than thirty seconds.

"Hey, I'm Agent 330. Come with me, please," the agent told her, turning and walking down the hallway. June trailed behind, wiping her palms on her pants.

Everything was fine.

They had walked two bland, identical hallways before Agent 330 spoke.

"It's probably just a question about your personal file," he said calmly, not even looking over. "Sometimes one of the instructors wants to clarify something, and since you don't have your phone right now, they have to do it in person."

"My file?" She asked, even as her heart rate went back down slightly. If *he* didn't think it was anything, it probably wasn't, right?

Unless he was wrong, or trying to lull her into a false sense of security.

"Yeah, like you mentioned knowing someone or living in a certain

place, and they want to know more. There's a huge directory that the Missions Department uses for intel; they make a note of any connections anyone has to anything of interest," 330 explained. "I'm betting it's something like that."

"You don't know, though? They didn't tell you why they were calling me in?" June asked despite herself.

"No, I'm just heading in the same direction and offered to bring you to the right room," he replied.

She considered asking more, before shaking her head. He didn't know anything, she would just be showing her anxiety even further if she kept pushing.

She lost track of the hallways they passed through. The building felt designed to be disconcerting, hallways at slightly odd angles and the rooms weren't consistent. There were meeting rooms, storage rooms, offices, spaces where there clearly *should* be a room but there were no visible doors (did this place have secret hallways?), and everything was the same bland beige walls and grey carpeting! She was certain they had used the exact same pieces of art on every floor!

This would be more fun to explore if she wasn't so *nervous*.

Finally, he stopped by a closed door, which had no label or anything helpful on it, and opened it for her.

"Ma'am? I've got N1J," he called through the doorway, then stepped aside for June to walk in. June murmured a thanks, slipped inside, and rubbed her palms on her thighs again.

Then she looked up, and felt the blood leave her face. Yuuup, that was the Director sitting there, watching her with a bland expression. She was an average looking woman, brown feathers and brown hair, wearing a nice, dark suit.

She was intimidating just *sitting down,* June had no idea how she would handle actually having to face this woman for anything serious, ever.

“Thank you for joining me, Trainee N1J. Please have a seat, we’re waiting for one other person,” Director Ravenson said politely, gesturing to another chair. She had a number of documents out in front of her, and didn’t even look up again as June took a seat.

Okay. It was okay. If something was wrong, Ravenson would probably look concerned, or annoyed, maybe even threatening, but certainly not distracted by her paperwork. She probably wouldn’t be meeting her directly if there was a *problem.*

June let her eyes wander. There wasn’t much to look at. Wall, wall, wall. No art in this room, just a small table with four chairs. She was just focusing on not looking at the paperwork spread on the table; no need to look nosy.

She *was,* but she didn’t need the Director thinking she was trying to see confidential documents.

A door opened. Not the one she had come in through, but one that had until that moment looked like a part of the wall. It half blocked the person walking in, all she could see was a white feathered hand.

“Sorry I’m late, Director, there was traffic,” an unfamiliar voice said, as she caught sight of a *very* familiar face coming past the door.

What was *Uncle Donald* doing here?!

Or… was it Uncle Donald? His voice certainly didn't fit, the suit was new, and for a moment she wondered if it was actually Dapper, but… no. She knew Dapper, and she knew her uncle. They were surprisingly similar looking people, (Aunt Daisy had *really* specific tastes!) but this was Uncle Donald.

With a really weird voice, she wanted *answers* about that. First, though…

"Hello, sir," she said carefully, hoping her face was blank. Maybe politely interested. Nervous would probably be fine too. Really, so long as shock or recognition weren't clear on her face she was good, right?

He glanced at her, and winked. Okay, *he* was making no attempt to pretend they didn't know each other…

"Agent Double Duck," Ravenson greeted, and *that* tossed June on another loop.

She'd heard that name. He was a *legend,* according to older agents. He got the kind of missions that ended up rescuing princesses and saving the world. He'd escaped certain death from so many missions that it was practically a joke.

He was known to always come back with a crazy tale, or new intel, no matter how basic the mission had been. Always some new lead, some new threat. The other agents thought it was so *lucky* of him to get the information no matter what.

Or *unlucky,* June realized with silent huff. This was actually making more and more sense, now that she thought about it.

Except for when he found the *time.* He was raising triplets! He'd been a Caballero saving the *world!*

"Trainee, I am already aware of you two knowing each other," Ravenson said with a small smile. "Though well done, you handled that well."

Wait, was this a test?

June nodded, uncertain how to react. Uncle Donald gave her a minute to think, scanning the small room and feeling under each table and chair. Was he looking for something? Ravenson certainly didn't look surprised, merely rising out of her seat to let him search it before settling back down.

"The reason we're here is because I'm in charge of your final training course," Uncle Donald explained, taking a seat. "We didn't want to put you on the spot."

Oh, that did make sense.

"Thanks for the warning," she replied, wary of talking too much with the Director in the room.

Uncle Donald looked amused.

“You can ask questions, if you want,” he said with a snort, “You aren’t getting your phone back until you’ve finished your training, same as everyone else.”

“Well, in that case… how do you even have *time* to be a *spy?!”* She demanded, leaning forward. “You have kids! Probably tons of other stuff going on! And like, your family is *insane* , do *they* know?”

“I actually retired when the boys were born, this is me coming out of retirement,” he answered with a shrug. “No, they don’t know. Which reminds me, we have news for you when you’re allowed contact again. So you probably have a lot of missed calls right now. Don’t panic when you see them.”

“Which… you’re not going to tell me right now?”

Was it good news, at least? He’d tell her if it was serious, right?

“That would give you an advantage over your other trainees,” he responded seriously. “Which is the other part of this; since I’ll be your instructor, we have to be careful to avoid any favoritism, accidental or otherwise.”

“Which goes both ways,” Ravenson cut in casually, “You should make an effort not to react any differently to Double Duck than any other instructor, despite your relationship.”

“Yes ma’am,” June said immediately.

“And refrain from mentioning knowing him; even saying you know another agent personally could potentially compromise your identities,” Ravenson continued. June nodded; it made sense, obviously confirming that there was a personal connection would invite curiosity, especially if anyone knew about this particular meeting.

“Once you’re a full agent it’ll be slightly less risky, but we’ll have to discuss this again once you have your assignment,” Uncle Donald added. “If you get assigned nearby we’ll probably have to be cautious even being seen together as civilians, since your teammates may run into you in town.”

“We can’t see each other at all while I’m a trainee, then?” June asked. It would be a bummer; she’d been excited to be back in town and near her family. She’d heard Panchito and José had even moved back to New Quackmore!

“We can probably meet privately, or away from Duckburg, but otherwise it wouldn’t be wise,” Uncle Donald answered carefully. “I’ve been able to play it off when people see me in town-”

“Or on social media,” Ravenson added mildly; Uncle Donald rolled his eyes. June *really* wished she had her phone right now.

“Or there,” he agreed, “but the pair of us would probably be pushing it.”

“What about April and May?” June had to ask; she didn’t want to stop them from seeing their uncle just because of her choices.

Uncle Donald’s face twisted.

“We’ll have to figure it out. You three don’t really look alike anymore, so it’ll probably be fine.”

“Perhaps a change of appearance when visiting?” Ravenson suggested. “Especially if you have sisters, the change in appearance may be enough to sell it. Donald Duck is fairly well known to have children around him at all times, it wouldn’t stand out if there was another one. So long as you don’t look much like yourself.”

“Like a different hairstyle,” Uncle Donald continued thoughtfully.

“Or a voice modulator?” June suggested cheekily; Uncle Donald swatted at her without even looking back up.

“My voice is a *bit* too distinct to cover up as having a lookalike running around,” he told her snootily. She giggled; yeah, it was certainly unique.

Ravenson looked intrigued by that.

“You know, you’ve said that before, but I don’t think I’ve ever heard your natural voice,” she said casually, leaning forward slightly. Uncle Donald glanced over to her, then shrugged, touching something at his throat.

“It’s a bit special, isn’t it?” He asked, and some part of June relaxed. *That* was her uncle, not that smooth baritone from a few moments before. That quack had comforted her and lectured her, told her jokes on bad days and helped with homework over a worn, cramped table full of loose arrows and leftovers, textbooks overflowing with notes in eight different handwritings. *That* voice had told her she didn’t need

her whole life figured out, she was special and important no matter what.

Ravenson blinked, surprise showing briefly on her face before she schooled it back into blandness.

“I can see why you’ve said it’s a strong identity protection,” she finally said. Uncle Donald snorted a laugh.

“It’s helped us with doppelgangers once or twice,” he said simply, and now June was muffling a laugh. A magic clone had been created in *at least* one adventure, and even they hadn’t been quite able to imitate the right voice; it had been incredibly weird to hear that quack and not understand it, somehow. Like he was speaking another language.

Even the *clone* had been baffled by it. Uncle Donald’s voice defied even magic.

Ravenson shook her head, but she looked amused, not annoyed. June decided she liked her.

But she was still terrifying.

“Give me a call when you’re out of training; I’m going to stay hands off best I can,” Uncle Donald continued; even he looked dubious about his ability to do that. Maybe if he stayed on missions that whole time, but even then…

“I will, and no thanks for telling me that there’s family news but *not* telling me what it is!” June said, perhaps a hair too loud, but Uncle Donald only laughed.

“Consider it an incentive to do well!” He told her with a sharp grin. June scowled at him.

“Well, I would like to give you two time to catch up, but I believe Trainee N1J needs to get back to training. Double Duck, Agent C4 is on base if you need to speak to him directly,” Ravenson interrupted, gathering her things neatly. Uncle Donald frowned, and abruptly he was Agent Double Duck, not her Uncle.

“Isn’t he still based in Houston? What is he doing *here?* ” He asked. Ravenson shrugged minutely.

“I don’t approve every agent movement in the agency,” she replied simply, a warning in her tone. Double Duck either didn’t care about it or didn’t hear it, and frowned further.

“Noted,” he replied, and it was clear that there was more to it, based on his tone. June wondered for a moment, before she reminded herself she *wasn’t supposed to know.*

Yet. When she wasn’t a trainee, she could ask, and maybe she could even know without snooping, but right now she needed to get through training.

It was a bit annoying, being on the bottom rung, not allowed to know much of anything, she couldn’t even be obviously interested, but! She was going to do this *right.*

At first, her interest in being a spy had been self-serving, a way to get out of trouble for breaking and entering. Then determination to live up to the agent that had stuck her neck out for her; if they had that

much faith in her, just from that one meeting, June felt like she *had* to do this. Even if she did fail, she needed to know that she had done everything in her power, hadn't half-assed it or self-sabotaged. If she failed it would be because it wasn't a good fit.

Then she'd gotten into her training, really seen what they did at SHUSH, taking down FOWL and people trying to end the world, exposing the same kind of corporate greed that had gotten her involved in the first place. Saving people. Being a kind of hero, but a well-supplied one. And June had gone from determined to downright obsessed, pouring herself into all of her lessons with a verve she didn't think she'd felt about *anything* before.

And now she was back to being worried about disappointing someone, but multiplied beyond her expectations. She couldn't fail, she could *not.* And she sure as *hell* would not risk this by depending on Uncle Donald to keep her out of trouble. She wouldn't even let the *appearance* of it ruin her reputation here. She was going to do this on her own.

Uncle Donald caught her eye, and he smiled again. She felt warm; it was a proud smile.

"I can't wait for you to finish training," he told her. Full confidence, nothing even remotely concerned. June nodded back.

"See you on the other side, Agent Double Duck," she said. His smile grew, before he nodded and stepped away, towards the hidden door he'd come in through.

She *would* be finding more of those. If they didn't tell her not to go looking, it clearly wasn't restricted.

“I’ll go find C4. Director, Trainee N1J,” he said, and disappeared through the doorway with a soft click.

“Trainee,” Ravenson said in dismissal, already standing by the doorway. “I assume you need a reason for this meeting, should your fellow trainees ask?”

June shook her head.

“Agent 330 mentioned it wasn’t unusual to be called in to clarify things in your personnel file,” she replied, “If I say that, nobody should ask any other details about it. Or at least I won’t have any reason to answer.”

Ravenson looked pleased with her answer, and stepped to the side for her to leave the room first.

The hallway was empty. June paused, trying to recall the path she had taken here.

“Take a left, take the stairs to B1 and go three doors down,” Ravenson directed, gesturing down the hallway.

June was positive she had come from the other direction, but she *did* need to go downstairs, so she nodded and followed her directions.

Sure enough, there she was, staring at the same gym her class was still working out in; did 330 lead her the long way on purpose, or did he not know the faster route? She didn’t know if he had a motive to delay her, since he hadn’t known why she was going there anyway.

She was probably being paranoid.

Maybe he was told to take longer to give Uncle Donald time to get there…?

She walked into the room. As with before, everyone's heads popped up from their varying exercise; RN waved from where she was spotting for G9I.

If nobody asked her anything, she wouldn't say anything. Talking would come across as defensive, and she had nothing to hide. She walked in casually, back to where she'd been working out before, like she didn't know everyone was watching her out of the corners of their eyes.

She settled back at the weights, taking a moment to breathe before she went back to lifting. It was fine, nothing was wrong.

Nobody was looking at her anymore. RN's lack of reaction was probably helping keep attention off of her; if their trainer didn't think her summons or reappearance was worth commenting on, then it probably wasn't worth paying attention to. Or hell, RN might have said something after June had left to minimize attention.

June continued her workout, glancing down briefly and catching sight of her sweats.

… ah phooey. She had just met with Director Ravenson in her workout gear, hadn't she?

Renovations and Revelations

Chapter Summary

Bonus :)

Donald wanted to follow Ravenson and gush about his niece, especially since he couldn't tell *anyone else* about it, but he had to set those emotions aside to focus on work. First, finding C4 since he was around somewhere.

Which was easier said than done; C4 didn't have an office in this base, despite this being his second visit in a few short months, so Donald had to check the areas for visiting agents first, which gave him no results. There weren't a lot of people here, actually.

So there was nobody for him to *ask,* either.

Annoyed, Donald decided to go back to his office and just email him, he didn't *have* to talk to him in person, only to find that the agent in question was waiting in the hallway.

"Ah, Agent DD! I was hoping to catch you, I heard you were gone most of the afternoon," C4 announced loudly. Donald squinted at him, glancing around. Was there someone in the hallway he was alerting?

He was probably being paranoid.

"I was actually looking for you," Donald told him, leading the way into his office. He started sweeping for bugs, as was his habit at this point no matter where he was (he'd genuinely had to fight the urge in Scrooge's office), while C4 took a seat.

C4 watched him do the sweep with a frown.

“Is that standard procedure now?” He asked. “Sweeping for listening devices?”

Donald shrugged.

“It’s not a procedural rule, no, but I feel better knowing we haven’t been infiltrated again,” he said, before taking a seat.

“So you want me as the team leader for this mission?” Donald asked after a moment. C4 blinked, then nodded.

“I will be frank, I still don’t appreciate your… methods. And I expect, while you’re under my direct command, that you’ll follow my lead,” C4 began, nose in the air just slightly. “But I also cannot deny you are an experienced agent and are already informed about the mission details, which saves time that we do not have. I intend to have agents sent out in three days.”

“That’s not as fast as I would have expected,” Donald observed. C4 sniffed.

“It takes time to set up a mission with so many agents,” he said in a snooty tone. “This is already pushing my timeline to plan things rather tight. Regardless, can I expect you on this mission?”

Donald had dinner with José, he had to talk to Scrooge, and then he had the theatre thing with the other heroes tomorrow night. This

would be leaving literally *right* after that, since it was likely they'd be up half the night investigating. Even if the building was empty, they would still need time to actually explore the theatre. It was a large building, that would take time.

But he *also* felt like he needed to be on this mission. He was still the only agent in the agency that had any direct magical experience, so if there was any trace of magic on Santiago's body or home, he was the only one that would be able to tell.

330 at least knew he had some experience, so if he was also joining the mission Donald could count on him for some backup or cover.

He'd just have to cast some healing spells right before the mission and drink a *lot* of coffee. Adrenaline should help in the moment, at least, since Donald had a lot of trouble sleeping on planes.

-Transmission Lost-

Regardless, he could make it work, it would just be an awful few days.

"I can go. Has 330 been tagged as well?" Donald asked, settling back in his chair.

"Against my better judgement, yes. He hasn't been part of an official investigation like this, has he?"

"No, but I would think this is a good opportunity," Donald replied. "I think he's more than capable of handling this kind of mission, and if he isn't, he's good about asking questions and deferring to someone else."

C4 didn’t look wholly convinced, but didn't continue the argument.

“I hope you will stick to the mission plan?” C4 asked. Donald breathed heavily through his nose, biting back a scowl.

“I don’t deviate for the fun of it,” he forced out blandly. “If I adjust a mission plan at the last minute, rest assured it was because outside circumstances forced my hand.”

“That didn’t seem to stop you on the duchess mission,” C4 responded sharply, apparently before he could stop himself, as he winced a moment later.

Donald stared at him for a moment, frowning. He’d only ever had one mission involving a duchess, and that had been…

“You mean the escort mission in Bangladesh?” He finally asked, baffled. C4 nodded tightly.

“Yes,” he confirmed tersely.

“With the court advisor hiring assassins?”

“ *Yes,”* C4 snapped. “You took it over despite me being ready to take it, and you deviated away from the mission plan so badly nobody could catch up, and it was all for your *ego-”*

“I wasn’t even an agent for that mission,” Donald cut him off.

The room went quiet.

“You- what?”

“I wasn’t a field agent. I didn’t even work for SHUSH yet,” Donald repeated. “I got dragged into it when the lead agent and Anya got caught in a firefight, and took over because she didn’t know who she was supposed to be meeting with and we didn’t trust anyone. I got recruited *after* that.”

He’d been on liberty from his ship at the time, two days away from shipping back out, and had stumbled onto the fight without a clue who was who. But when one person is clearly unarmed and surrounded by people trying to kill her, it seemed easy to pick a side. He’d gotten her out, dragged the agent out (he’d been unconscious, and Donald had never heard his name), then left the man in a hospital with Donald’s dog tags around his neck while they continued a desperate trek to Paris.

Hooter had personally met them at their final destination days later, offering to cover up Donald’s disappearance if he would join SHUSH instead of staying on his ship and dealing with the fallout for his disappearance.

Donald loved the Navy. It had hurt to leave. But the offer was too good to pass up. And for a while, being part of SHUSH had been nice; he’d still been able to travel, they helped cover up him no longer being at sea for the last few months of his deployment. But when he’d been ‘done’ with the Navy, Hooter made it clear he was still expected to make SHUSH his priority over everything else.

Which had been tricky, trying to date Daisy and go on missions while keeping his family in the dark. Then he'd decided to go back to school, and his birthday with the inheritance of the cabana had happened, and Hooter *still* wouldn't lighten his load… Donald had been burning the candle at both ends and was completely unable to tell *anyone* about it.

The Cabs had picked up on part of it, after a while, which helped a bit. Xandra had at least accepted that if he was at work, she couldn't come and kidnap him for something, no matter how dire, if she didn't want to get shot. But that was *also* when the first Kingdom Hearts summons had happened, and he'd quit SHUSH out of sheer desperation for some sleep. A bit of traveling with José and Panchito, and then the boys had been laid and everything had gone to hell in a handbasket for a completely different reason.

Hooter had never accepted it. Had spent years trying to drag him back in, just one more mission to get him hooked, trying to find some kind of leverage on Donald to keep him under his thumb… But he'd only succeeded once.

"You weren't- what are you *talking* about?" C4 demanded, dragging Donald back into the present. "How would you just *take over* an agent's mission if you weren't an agent?!"

"Wrong place, wrong time. The duchess knew where we were supposed to be going, but not who to reach next, so I opted to just… get her to safety and deal with the rest later," Donald explained.

"But you already had an agent code!"

"She gave it to me, actually," Donald answered. "Neither of us knew what the rules were for codenames, she just figured I needed *something."*

She knew his real name, of course, Donald had had no reason to hide that, but Anya had never once mentioned it.

"How- why-" C4 looked like his entire world view was crumbling in front of him. Donald didn't really care, though it was interesting to find out how long C4 had been nursing a grudge. He hadn't even known the other agent had been assigned the mission.

Anya would have hated him, though, *that* he knew.

"I got recruited after helping out, they fudged my start date and training schedule so nobody would put it together, and that was that," Donald said casually. "I'm guessing Hooter never mentioned that to you."

"No," C4 said slowly, face blank. "No, he didn't."

There was a long silence, while Donald let C4 process the information that, apparently, was a surprise to him. Donald, meanwhile, wondered if C4 would be able to figure out his identity based on that information. How many Americans had been in the country at the time, anyway?

But it had been a number of years, and he hadn't said *why* he was in Bangladesh, so he was probably safe. Assuming C4 cared enough to look into it; he seemed to be having a terrible epiphany.

"Well, I- thank you for explaining," C4 said finally, rubbing his hands on his thighs. "I, ah- to answer your question, yes, Agent 330 is also slated to be on this mission. I am still finishing the final assignments, but the full group will be contacted this evening. You will receive the

final mission brief before you leave. If you'll excuse me?"

And without waiting, he left the room, still looking shell shocked.

Donald wondered at his reaction, surely it wasn't that big of a surprise that Hooter had been a secretive bastard even then?

Resolving to worry about it later, Donald packed up his things to go home. It was a bit early, sure, but with how his schedule looked for the next few days, he needed the brief reprieve.

Except before home, he was going to the Manor first. Where he was met by the kids, plus Violet and Lena, running past him shouting about a new discovery, heading for the plane. Dewey was saying something about dibs.

He managed to catch Lena by the hand before she passed by, but she jerked away so sharply he almost tumbled from the pull.

"Sorry, sorry!" He was already apologizing as he straightened back up. Lena looked wild eyed, then as she caught sight of him, her face went bright red.

"Ohhh my god I am so sorry," she moaned into her hands. Donald reached out, slower, and when she didn't shy away, patted her gently on the shoulder before drawing back.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" He asked, brows creased; he didn't *think*

he'd grabbed her very hard, but she had been running, so maybe he'd misjudged his grip?

But she shook her head.

"No, I was just… startled, I guess," she said slowly, dropping her hands. "Um. What didya need?"

"Just wanted to see where you were going," he answered, already regretting it. He could have called after them and saved the poor kid a heart attack.

"Oh, Webby got a lead on something she's researching," Lena said, apparently recovered, leaning against a wall. "Wanted to show everyone right away."

"… on the plane?" He asked dubiously.

"Um… yeah, for… ambiance?" Lena offered awkwardly, slumping further down the wall.

"Ambiance," Donald repeated.

"Yuup. Anyway, gotta go!" She declared, and darted off before he could speak to her any further.

Well, that was in no way suspicious. And it surely wouldn't come back to haunt him later. He continued into the house, where he found Della and Penny pouring over a cellphone screen, Penny with a look of

utmost concentration.

“But *why* does a colon right parenthesis mean happiness?” She demanded, turning the screen one way and the other.

“Cause it’s a little face! Look, turn it *this* way and-” Della was explaining, waving at Donald as he passed.

“Oh, Donald,” Penny said, looking away from her phone. “I am told it is customary to offer congratulations for your upcoming child.”

Donald smiled, genuinely touched. Penny struggled with earth social cues, especially when her first introduction to Earth had been *Della,* which made it all the more impactful when she tried.

“Thank you,” he replied seriously, and Penny smiled as well, a look of relief crossing her face. He could almost see her internal satisfaction at getting it right.

“Looking for Uncle Scrooge?” Della asked, looking at him more fully. He nodded, wondering if he was about to get into *another* debate on his place in the family versus where Della wanted him.

Thankfully, this time she merely pointed in the direction of the bedrooms and went back to her conversation with Penny, apparently satisfied.

So off Donald went, up the stairs and further along to the family wing.

It was the least gaudy section of the Manor; Scrooge had learned early on that any interesting or delicate decorations should be saved for wings that did *not* contain a young Della and Donald, and having the boys had not changed that. So the walls were adorned with less important artwork, more family portraits and personal mementos. Few if any vases or ornaments, minimizing the potential casualties from death darts or impromptu back flips.

Donald walked along the hallways, wondering *why* Scrooge would be up here this time of day, peering into each open door in confusion. Scrooge's room was first, and it was empty. Webby's room was closed, Donald wasn't going to intrude even if he knew she was elsewhere, but he doubted Scrooge would be inside. The boys room was messy, they clearly needed to do the laundry, but also deserted.

Further along was Della's room. They'd renovated it while he was on the Moon or the island; new paint, new furniture, he was pretty sure it was actually a bit bigger in fact. He hadn't looked in it since she had disappeared, so his memory *could* be off. It lacked some things; he really needed to pull the family photos out so she could pick some out. There were some adventure mementos, new and old, and a few new photos, desk covered in research for something or other.

Next door was his old room. He hadn't been inside in years, and was honestly going to walk past, but he finally heard movement and paused, pushing the door open with a frown.

The very first thing that hit him was the smell of fresh paint. Then the color, a simple blue instead of the generic greyish beige color he'd always suspected was a mix mistake that Scrooge had bought on a discount. A breeze.

Then he blinked, and the room resolved itself. A new bed frame near the wall, king sized but missing the mattress. A few picture frames laid flat on a nightstand, a hammer lying nearby. The windows were open, curtains fluttering, dissipating the smell of paint and sheetrock.

The old fireplace was clean (and functional?), a couch shoved at an awkward angle nearby. Against the wall was what his confused mind thought was a guitar stand and a desk.

He glanced to the side, expecting to see the dresser, but found a bigger surprise: where there *had* been a wall, there was now a wide doorway, no door hanging in it yet, and through it was another room.

The next room over was unoccupied, last Donald knew, but that didn't help him understand what he was looking at.

"Donald? What are you doing up here?" Scrooge demanded, appearing from the other side of the couch, huffing. Donald blinked at him.

"Uh… Della said you were up here?" He answered, staring around again. What was going on?

"Ach, that lass… didn't mean for you to see it until I was done," Scrooge grumbled, shaking his head. He huffed again, before gesturing around them.

"Well, what do you think so far? Still got a fair bit of work to do, Beakley is checking the spare rooms for some more furniture…" Scrooge said, walking to the door to tug Donald further in. "Mattress will be here in a few days. I've got some more frames, but I'll let you decide what to put in them. Took some doing to get the window open, but there it is!"

"I think the last paint job sealed it accidentally," Donald said absently. The picture was getting clearer, but he was still… lost. "It looks great, Scrooge."

Scrooge grinned at him, then gestured to the doorway.

" *That* was the biggest hurdle," he revealed, leading the way to the connected room. "Knocking out walls is no joke, Beakley about had a conniption, moaning about wires and plumbing, but there you are!"

Donald walked through. On the other side, the room also smelled of fresh paint, the walls a cheerful yellow, and decorated with mahogany furniture. It was a nursery, crib and rocking chair set carefully with bright blankets and pillows. A mobile hung over the crib; it looked an awful lot like the one Donald remembered from his *own* baby photos, and abruptly he felt like crying.

The room was exactly where the boys would have hatched, in another life. He could almost picture them in the crib, three yellow puffballs snoring in a heap. Could almost see Scrooge in the rocking chair, telling some story until they fell asleep.

The mobile twinkled in the light, twirling slowly.

"Went home after the Beaks debacle today and got everything painted, but it may be a bit sticky still, watch your suit-"

"I am so sorry," fell out of Donald's mouth before he could stop himself. His hands were shaking at his sides, his vision was blurring, and all he could see was the boys.

"Donald?"

"I should never have taken the boys when Della disappeared," he said, staring at the nursery. The yellow was running into the dark wood,

streaking across his eyes. Almost duckling yellow. “This should have been their nursery, we shouldn’t have left, I left you here *alone.* I’m so sorry.”

Yellow ducklings with giant eyes looking at him like he was their whole world. Days, *weeks,* of barely sleeping while keeping them all fed and clean, and all that time Scrooge was here-

“Donald?!”

“I’m so so sorry.” It was all he could say. He couldn’t see the room anymore. His hands were shaking.

His hands were still; Scrooge was squeezing them, he was close enough Donald could see the shine off his glasses.

“Donald,” Scrooge said, waiting until Donald blinked away tears, staring at him intensely. “You did the right thing.”

Donald blinked again, staring at him. He’d- they hadn’t talked about it. Not once. Even when they moved back in. Even when Della came back. They’d talked about the Spear, about trust and teaching the boys to be safe no matter the odds.

They hadn’t talked about why they hadn’t known about him until then. Why they hadn’t been getting those lessons the entire time.

“I- but you-” he stuttered. Scrooge shook his head, mouth quirked in a humorless grin.

“You said at the time I was too caught up in meself to be around babies,” Scrooge said carefully, slowly, “and I can’t say you were wrong. You saw me when you came back, do you really think I was fit to be around children? Fairly sure that Beakley told Webby to leave me be for the lass’ sake, not mine.”

“But if we had *been here-”*

“I would have chased you off,” Scrooge insisted. “I *would* have, Donald, don’t you argue with me. I know where my head was, and it wasn’t in the right place for raising Della’s eggs. Besides…”

He paused, sighed, shaking his head.

“Besides,” he continued ruefully, “It’s not like you moved away. I could have come to you at any time. That’s on me, and I won’t hear another word about it.”

Donald took a shuddering breath, squeezing his eyes closed.

It wasn’t like he hadn’t thought about it, in the last decade. Should he just go back to the Manor, should they make up, should should should- but he’d never done it. Said to himself if Scrooge wanted to be there he *could* be, and Donald was done reaching out. But it had been haunting him, wondering what if.

His life had far too many what ifs in it lately.

“The nursery looks nice,” Donald finally said quietly, when he had his composure back. Scrooge nodded decisively, releasing Donald’s hands and stepping back. He brushed off the prior conversation with a tug of

his lapels. Donald thought about insisting they continue this topic, but… did he really want to?

"Good! Had a time picking a color; didn't think the kids would take it well if I picked one of their colors, but that ruled out half the board!"

Yeah, there would probably be some kind of bragging rights to whoever's favorite color was picked by the new baby. Or the kid in question would hate sharing. Hard to predict this early.

"It will be a bit funny if they get duckling yellow feathers though," Scrooge added thoughtfully. "Any idea what they might hatch into?"

"Not a dragon," Donald said absently. "We're taking them back for a second exam soon, but we haven't gotten any more info yet."

"Well, do tell us when you know; we've got a friendly bet going on since their species is a bit of a question," Scrooge said easily.

Donald was just surprised it wasn't Louie bringing it up.

"Now, help me move this blasted couch, would you? Can't lift it enough to fix this rug," Scrooge continued cheerfully, moving past the awkwardness like he could dismiss it by sheer willpower. Donald followed along, still feeling off-kilter and unwilling to interrupt Scrooge's bulldozer methods.

Together they tugged the couch to a more reasonable angle, and Scrooge was able to tug the crumpled rug underneath to lay flat.

“There! Thought it would be nice to have somewhere for the three of you to sit,” Scrooge explained, fussing over a throw pillow. “Thankfully we had this in storage.”

“The three of us…?”

“You and your two fellas,” Scrooge replied immediately. Too fast. Like he’d been preparing to answer it. “I know your boat is only down the hill, but in the winter you can hardly be going up and down that hill at night! Can’t risk slipping with a new hatchling. So had to make sure you had somewhere to stay if it gets late.”

Oh.

Well, it made *sense.* Donald had two partners, they were having a baby together, obviously they would probably be together most of the time.

But.

Well.

This wasn’t just a minimal gesture. That would have been getting a bigger bed. Setting up a basic nursery so Donald had a reason to let the new baby sleep here sometimes, maybe, since it was clear Scrooge *wanted* that.

But the room had been repainted. They’d connected the nursery so it would be easier to stay. The room was freshly decorated, Scrooge was finding family photos to hang and thinking about what things *Donald* might want, what Panchito and José may want even; a place to cuddle by a fire. A place to put instruments. Even the *desk* was new, Donald

had had a converted lower bunk as a desk before, when he and Della had decided to get separate rooms as teenagers.

This was *thoughtful.*

Donald didn't know how to handle thoughtful.

"... thank you," he said, looking around again. "How long have you been working on this?"

"Oh, the last week or so? You pointed out it hadn't had much attention in a while, and we were setting up the nursery anyway," Scrooge explained breezily, like it was nothing.

The furniture had been free, Donald reminded himself. The paint and drywall tools, those were probably new purchases, but most of this had already been in the Manor.

"Just you and Bentina?"

Wait, had Scrooge been asking *Bentina* for advice? Was that why he'd been checking that Donald considered her a friend? So he could trust her opinions?

"Aye, didn't want the kids to spoil the surprise," Scrooge replied, before rolling his eyes. "Didn't realize I had to worry about Della instead."

"She was distracted by Penny," Donald defended, but he was biting

back a grin.

“Bah,” Scrooge grumbled.

“It was a nice surprise,” Donald added. Scrooge grumbled again.

“Aren’t you supposed to be getting to your date?” He grumped, crossing his arms. Donald laughed, and decided to leave. He didn’t think *either* of them could handle this for much longer.

Date Night?

“Wait, what *did* happen with Beaks?” Donald remembered to ask before he left. Scrooge scoffed, fussing with the angle of the rocking chair.

“Bah, the puffed-up peacock got it in his head we’re rivals or some such thing, came to challenge me to some kind of competition,” Scrooge complained. “Spouting some nonsense about a repeat without any ‘outside influences.’ As though *we* were some long established rivals! That competition was with Flinty! Why I would feel the need to prove I can best *Beaks* at *anything* is beyond me. Only reason I even humored him was to keep him distracted until you got out of the parking lot.”

“Thanks for that,” Donald said, surprised. He’d assumed Scrooge’s main goal was to get his own petty revenge in some way. Scrooge shrugged, looking slightly put out.

“Didn’t need to do much for that in the end though, your old friend showed up and stole his blasted helicopter!” He exclaimed. Donald let out a snort of laughter.

“Just flew off with the thing! And Gizmoduck chased after him, said he dropped it off on Beaks’ own building!” Scrooge continued, a smile sneaking onto his face even through his annoyed speech. Donald laughed harder. “I thought the blowhard had grown up!”

“Guess he- he decided Beaks was missing out,” Donald managed through his giggling. “Every other member of the Billionaire’s Club had- had a visit back in the day.”

Scrooge rolled his eyes, not even trying to hide his amusement now.

“Well Beaks certainly didn’t think it was all that humorous,” he revealed. “Called some police officer over to file a complaint, the officer pointed out that he’d left it in the middle of a *road,* and they’d been working on a way of towing it out, and *then* Gizmoduck shows up to announce the helicopter had been returned to the owner’s property!”

Donald knew all this, of course, but it was much funnier hearing it from Scrooge’s point of view.

“Beaks ended up storming off with the officer, needed a ride home after all. I imagine he’ll be back whenever he remembers what he was around for,” Scrooge finished.

“Or he’ll be too embarrassed to try again,” Donald replied.

“Eh, his pride seems to be pretty resilient, suppose we’ll see. Been meaning to ask what happened between the two of you to get him so focused,” Scrooge asked, and finally left the chair to lean against the changing table instead.

Donald scoffed, shaking his head.

“Ran into him in a coffee shop, he wanted to take a selfie for his Tweeter page; he seems to think it’ll be popular,” he explained shortly. “I blew him off. He followed me clear to *St. Canard,* that’s when I-”

“Got in a bar fight?” Scrooge asked pleasantly. “Heard something about that.”

Donald stuck his tongue out at him.

“-helped remove a disruption from a bar,” Donald insisted, not even trying not to laugh. “Anyway, at this point I think he’s just too proud to let it go.”

Some part of him wished he’d just let him take the damn photo after all. Beaks would have lost interest and he’d be out of Donald’s feathers. But with his luck, that would have made things worse, somehow. Like Beaks thinking they were buddies or something.

“Sounds about right,” Scrooge agreed, nodding. “Well, hopefully he’ll get distracted by some other bauble and leave off.”

“Or the Warners will successfully drive him insane,” Donald added absently, considering. The trio rarely gave up a cause; he doubted even the distance would be enough to stop them if they were determined.

“Ah, those were…?”

“Bugs and Daffy’s kids, from the campus tour.”

“Right, and you met them…?”

“Why the third degree?” He asked, lifting one brow. Scrooge shrugged casually.

“Just curious! Can’t recall you mentioning them before!” He insisted.

When Donald would have mentioned them wasn’t clear, given when he had met them and all.

“I helped Bugs finalize their adoption five, six years ago,” Donald explained. “We’ve kept in touch, but they live in Burbank, so…”

“Noticed that happened with a lot of your friends,” Scrooge said, examining the grooves of the changing table. “Moving away, not being able to visit much.”

Donald felt his eyes narrow.

“It happens,” he replied carefully, “It’s hard to keep up contact when we’re all so busy, people have to move for work or life in general… not that weird.”

It hadn’t been on *purpose.* Mickey, Bugs and Daffy moving to L.A. was more than reasonable, they were actors. Daisy traveled to get her fashion career going, Goofy moved back to his hometown to raise Max after his wife’s death, Panchito and José had to leave when their student visas finally expired.

And those were his less unusual friends; Xadhoom had left when the Evronians had been defeated, planning to continue to destroy them on every planet they existed on. Kay had taken some long-term mission that even he couldn’t access the details of (he hoped. Classified status could mean top secret mission, but it could also mean… unable to verify status). Raider wasn’t really a friend that Donald wanted to pop in, Lyra had returned to her own time, Uno was… well.

And he didn't consider Everett any kind of friend anymore.

"Fair, fair. Just noticed they all seem to be coming out of the woodwork lately," Scrooge said, still looking away.

Donald really hated that conversation technique; mostly because it was proving effective today.

"Guess so," he replied. "Hadn't really thought about it."

It *was* odd, the timing. But none of the people he'd been seeing more of lately were connected to each other except through him. It was just a coincidence. Or fate, if he felt like being dramatic.

Scrooge huffed, then glanced at his watch and hissed.

"You really ought to get going," he insisted, and this time Donald did leave, waving a goodbye.

"Thanks," Donald added, pausing briefly in the doorway, "for setting this up. I appreciate it."

Scrooge huffed again, but he looked pleased.

"Needed to be done," he insisted, and waved him off again.

He got to briefly see the kids again, this time running away from the plane to the backyard, carrying a few bags and boxes amongst them.

Ominous. That was probably fine.

Quick drive down the hill, finally tossing his work things away to change into something more comfortable, then through the new doorway.

Panchito gave him a wave and a kiss as he reached the main floor of the cabana, holding a finger to his lips before Donald could speak. He gestured towards the couch.

Donald peered around, and found José curled around the egg, fast asleep, with Ari and Humphrey settled around him. Donald had taken a picture with his phone before he'd even considered it.

Panchito giggled into his shoulder silently, before tugging him back downstairs.

“I think our egg could not be safer,” Panchito chuckled when they reached the basement level, Donald nodding in agreement. “So let me show you the nursery so far!”

So saying, he tugged the door open. The room was freshly painted a pale green, and there was a crib now, with a matching changing table.

It was clearly the same style as the one from Scrooge's nursery.

“These are from your uncle,” Panchito said, oblivious to Donald's realizations on that point, “he and Mrs. Beakley brought them through this morning! April has said she and May plan to overload us on diapers, and my family is sending us baby clothes!”

“Keep a list, we'll want to send thank you cards or something,” Donald reminded him; Panchito rolled his eyes cheerfully, likely planning to ignore him entirely, but Donald knew their addresses, he could do it himself.

“Daisy called, threatened to cause us all bodily harm if she was not invited to see them when they hatch,” Pancho continued. “She also offered to host a baby shower?”

Oh, that was an uncomfortable thought. They *should,* if only to make sure everyone in the family had gotten the news, but it made him feel on edge.

“Let's… wait until we have an idea what they're going to hatch into. We might need to make up a different cover story down the line,” he finally replied. Daisy at least would accept their reasoning if they explained the situation…

Actually, who did they know that they couldn't tell? This was all because of a family adventure, he didn't need to keep things secret this time. He was just so *used* to having to keep things under wraps he couldn’t help but plan a contingency just in case.

But Panchito was nodding anyway, and it kept Donald from having to make a decision *now,* so he didn't address it.

“I've got news for you two,” Donald said after a moment, looking around the room again. “A few things, actually. How long do we have

before you have to go to work?"

Panchito smiled sheepishly.

"I possibly took today off," he admitted, shrugging lightly at Donald's surprised face. "We have had no time alone in weeks! I don't blame your familia for wanting you close after this, but we have things to talk about!"

Donald winced. They did, didn't they?

"Do not make that face! It isn't all serious things! For example, we must discuss baby names!" Panchito insisted.

Names. Oh boy, they needed to pick a *name.*

"We don't know their gender yet," Donald pointed out frantically, but Pancho shrugged.

"We can still make a list of ones we all like! This way when they hatch we are ready!"

Last time around he'd just picked some that he liked and thought they could grow into. Della's choices had been… something, for sure. Jet, Rebel and Turbo… sure, Dewey was mad right *now* he didn't get to be Turbo, but Donald knew his kid, he would have been sick of the novelty after a year or two and would have wanted something *cool* and *different.* Like Archibald, or Ferdinand. Something with some distinction.

There wasn't much else to see here, so they slipped back upstairs to the kitchen. There were enchiladas in the oven, Panchito's work, which meant they were going to be *spicy*.

“How're your pepper plants doing?” Donald asked, letting Panchito enthuse about his sprouts and a few hybrids he was trying in their small pot garden on the porch while they waited for dinner to cook.

“Ah, Donald! I didn’t hear you arrive!” José called into the kitchen before he appeared himself, feathers ruffled from sleep and carrying the egg under one arm. It was faintly glowing, and seemed like a much warmer light than it had been even when Donald saw it last this morning. A yellow gold underneath the ruby red shell.

He wondered if it would continue shifting colors until hatching. If they meant anything, or were just because of the baby’s magical heritage. Maybe they would know more when they brought the egg back to the World Tree for another check-up…

“You were sleeping,” he replied, leaning down to peck a kiss to his beak. José caught his collar and tugged him back for a proper one, beak curling in a smirk at Donald’s muffled squawk.

Ari, from the doorway, let out a wolf-whistle, giggling when Donald flipped him off. He then let out a few very serious-sounding chirps, gesturing between himself, Humphrey, and the egg with an inquisitive note.

“No, we don’t need a babysitter tonight,” Panchito answered first, Donald shaking his head.

He’d felt… off, not having their egg nearby today. He’d tried to ignore it by focusing on work, but honestly, he wanted them nearby. He felt

better already, his soul soothed.

God he hoped that was his over-protectiveness coming back, or just being around the Cabs helping with his stress levels, not a sign he was still injured. *Would* having the egg closer speed up the magic damage? Did that make any sense?

He hesitated, then shrugged and voiced the question. José might know.

Except first they both turned to look at him with concern. Phooey.

“Donal’, it still hurts?” Panchito asked first, stepping up to press his hand to Donald’s chest, like he could feel for any injuries still potentially there. Donald shrugged, letting his head briefly drop to Panchito’s shoulder.

“Just aches,” he said quietly. “It’s better right now, today was… rough, for a bit.”

José leaned around, one hand gently on his shoulder. His gaze went unfocused, a slight glow to his pupils, looking Donald up and down with a frown.

“... there is scarring, amor,” José finally said, looking troubled. “I believe it will heal, but it will hurt, possibly more if you attempt any magic in the meantime.”

Great. He had magic lessons with Lena!

“I’m going to be incapable of any magic at this rate,” he muttered, thinking about the Blot’s damage. José winced, rubbing his shoulder.

“It will heal,” he repeated. Donald nodded, then dragged the three of them into a hug. He loved the warmth, he was always a bit cold. Side effect of elemental ocean magic, he just ran cold now. He could handle it, he was fine, but it made the collective body heat all the more comforting when he got it.

The oven went off. Panchito sighed, pulling away so he could deal with dinner. Donald took over holding the egg, pressing it against his chest so they could feel each other’s warmth. Eggs needed to be kept warm, but they also needed to be held by their parents, for their scent, for their voices, possibly just for the parent’s mental health too.

“So you said you had something to tell us?” Panchito prompted as he served up dinner. José looked up with interest, clearly still sleepy, while Donald sighed, trying to sort out his thoughts.

“Couple things,” he started. “First off, Scrooge also built a nursery. Like, a whole nursery, expanded my bedroom, got us a new bed… whole thing.”

As expected, they both looked surprised by that.

“You just live down the hill,” José pointed out, one eyebrow raised. Donald shrugged.

“He said it was so we wouldn’t have to walk down the hill if it got late at night, especially when we have a little one,” he explained, but even he didn’t really buy it.

He thought back to Della's insistence that Scrooge wanted him to stay at the Manor, and wondered if she had been right. He'd never felt terribly welcome in the Manor, at least not after he'd moved out the first time. Like his place in the building had been painted over and no longer fit him.

But maybe that had been *him?* Bentina's rules had been grating for sure, but after they'd hashed out a few things they had been fine, he *could* have handled it. May have been comfortable enough, eventually, once he'd settled back into his old room. Might have replaced the furniture himself, gotten the necessary space, felt like it was *his* room again, not a guest room with his name on it.

But he knew it wouldn't have been permanent. As soon as the boys were grown he would have moved out of the pool either way, so Gladstone's offer had probably kept him *closer* than he would have been, honestly. Meant that he was close, within walking distance, but exactly where he wanted to be (where he needed to be) without feeling too far or too suffocated. He'd lived away from the Manor longer than he'd actually lived there, and he had no desire to move back. Not forever.

But he wondered. If Scrooge had been hoping to entice him back. Even for one night here and there, instead of him insisting on making the walk back down the hill.

"Well, we will have to take a look! That is nice of him," Panchito said cheerfully. Donald squinted at him.

"It's for the three of us," he clarified, in case that wasn't obvious, and this time Panchito also blinked at him.

"Ah, really?"

“It’s a king-sized bed, even,” Donald continued, starting to smile at his surprised face.

“Are you certain it isn’t meant just for you?” José asked, but he was fighting a smile as well.

“He was *really* clear about it,” Donald answered. “Almost uncomfortably so.”

José had also heard the phone call; he knew what Donald was thinking about. Scrooge had been pretty clear then about how welcome Donald’s partners would be in the Manor.

So for him to be that direct *this* time… it was interesting. A good thing, he thought, at least so he had a moment to point to if Scrooge ever tried to reverse course. Not that Donald would *want* to stay there if Scrooge started trying to kick José or Panchito out, but it would be nice to have the upper hand if it came up.

He glanced at Panchito. Whose eyes were suspiciously watery.

“Pancho…?”

“He’s *welcoming us into his home!”* Panchito exclaimed, tears breaking free, leaning in to grasp Donald’s shoulders.

“Ah…”

“He’s trying to make us feel welcome!”

“Sure, but…”

“He is *trying,* and he has never tried with us before!”

Well, Donald couldn’t argue with *that.* José watched them both with a thoughtful expression. When Donald caught his eye, he nodded slowly.

“This *is* a first,” José pointed out. Donald glanced down at the egg in his arms.

“Well, there may be a reason for it,” José acknowledged, shrugging casually. “But he did apologize before this.”

“Because the kids wouldn’t talk to him if he didn’t,” Donald pointed out, uncertain why he was even doing so. It seemed like every time Scrooge did something *good,* something Donald could say he wanted from his uncle, Donald felt compelled to bring up *bad* things to complain about. Every step Scrooge took forward, Donald took back. How was that fair of him? Why wasn’t he happy Scrooge was trying at *all?*

“If he truly wasn’t sorry, I don’t think he would have bothered; he may have said enough to placate the children, but certainly not everything else,” José replied.

“Sure,” Donald grumbled. “… is it so much to ask that it be because he genuinely felt bad, not because he doesn’t want to disappoint the kids?”

He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth. José was watching him quietly, while Panchito frowned.

"If he didn't feel badly about how things went," he asked, "why would he apologize at all? Your sobrinos may have pushed the issue, but he had to know there was a problem first, yes?"

"He- I- I don't know. It isn't important, he *is* trying," Donald insisted, wishing he'd kept his big mouth *shut* for once, because they weren't going to let him back out, he could already see it on their faces.

"It *is* important," José said, "because you're clearly still bothered by it."

"Yeah, that doesn't mean I'm *right!"*

"Right or wrong, you feel something, that is worth talking about. You are allowed to feel things even if they aren't…" Panchito began, before pausing, beak twisting.

"Logical," José finished for him, also peering closely at Donald's face.

Donald let out a groan, looking down and stuffing his face with food instead of talking. Above him, he could see the pair look at each other, before sighing and continuing to eat.

That wouldn't last, he knew that. If he wanted to avoid talking about his feelings, he'd have to offer a proper distraction. Or learn to just shut *up*.

“José, Ravenson wants to do another magic seminar,” he muttered into the table. “In Europe, this time.”

José considered his words for a moment, chewing.

“That may be harder to do on short notice,” he admitted, running his fingers through his feathers. “With some work I can find the time, I suppose, but it may not be as immediate as she’s hoping.”

“I can pass that along.”

“No need, I still have her email from before. She knows we know each other, then? I wasn’t certain.” José asked. Donald pressed his beak together.

“Clearly,” he said, before considering the *other* personal information he’d learned today. For a moment, he wanted to reveal June’s new status. He wanted to brag about it, wanted them to know how well she was already doing, but he knew he couldn’t. She would tell them if she wanted, no matter that they already knew about him.

“You don’t seem happy about that; do we not like her? I thought we liked her.” Panchito noted. Donald sighed.

“She… reminds me of someone. I don’t know *who,* though, and it’s bothering me,” he admitted. “It’s probably nothing, but she’s made a few comments that make me think *she* knows *me.”*

“Like what?” Panchito asked, head tilting. Donald frowned, trying to

remember. In truth, the comments had been minimal, and on their own he'd probably dismiss them, but it was adding up slowly as *something.*

"Just… a few things," he said slowly. "Nothing really *big,* just… She made a joke about me being the same, when I first rejoined. And she mentioned not knowing about something that happened while we were in college, and I couldn't figure why she *would* know it in the first place. It wouldn't be in my file."

José squinted at him.

"And you can't remember her at all? No previous missions?"

Donald shook his head.

"She probably just knows my file and reputation or something," Donald said, "but it puts me on edge. She hasn't done anything untrustworthy."

If anything she'd been *very* trustworthy; she knew about Donald *and* José's magic, after all. He didn't regret that revelation, she hadn't done anything to make him worried about it. Which told him he was probably being paranoid.

"Perhaps if you ask her, she'll know?" José suggested. "It may be that you knew each other, but she looked differently?"

Possibly. He couldn't think of anyone, but that didn't mean José was wrong. He'd met a lot of people over the years, and the time when he was first working as Double Duck had been… hectic. Maybe he *had*

met Ravenson when they were younger and she'd just been lost in the shuffle.

"I'll think about it," he agreed. Even if they *had* met, that didn't mean he should be asking about it.

José nodded, and Panchito took the opportunity to tell them both about the new music at his club, and how much he liked their trumpet player and her bad jokes. José clearly already knew most of this, he was asking follow up questions that Donald didn't have context for, and for a moment, he felt… unhappy.

It wasn't *their* fault he didn't live in the same house. He was going to miss some occasional conversations no matter what happened, it was normal. But as he tried to pick up if it was Jennifer that loved puns or Janey, he had to take a deep breath to keep himself centered.

He did need to make sure they spent more time together. The connected doorways would help, right? It had essentially made their two homes into one. They could have more nights together when there wasn't a commute; José could even get to work faster if he parked on this side of things… except Panchito didn't have a car, so having all vehicles on the beach wouldn't be the best idea.

"Donal'?"

He jumped, looking up from his empty plate. Panchito was peering at him.

"Sorry, just… distracted. What was that?" Donald asked, wincing when Panchito didn't reply immediately.

“Do you need some rest? We can talk in the morning,” José offered. Donald shook his head harshly.

“No, no, we barely have any time together as it is, I don’t want to spend our whole night sleeping! I just need some coffee, I’m fine,” he insisted, earning himself two dubious looks.

“We are basically living together again, Donald,” José pointed out. “We do not need to stress out over time together.”

True, but-

“And we will enjoy our time more if you are well-rested!” Panchito added, and Donald was being tugged to the couch, egg wrapped in his arms, bundled into a throw blanket that smelled like spices.

He struggled for a moment, because they *did* have other things to talk about, and he *wanted* to spend time together while conscious, but the second his back hit the couch, José had plopped onto his legs, Panchito was settling underneath Donald’s head with a hum, and his vision went dark.

Deflate

Donald woke to darkness. Red-tinged darkness. And a hand running through his hair.

“Your feathers are getting curly,” Panchito murmured as Donald twisted his head around and opened his eyes.

“Haven’t had time to trim them,” he replied under his breath.

“I like them,” José breathed from Donald’s lap, beak rubbing through the feathers on his stomach. “You should grow them out.”

Donald let out a grunt of disagreement, but didn’t bother refuting it. He’d tried to let them out when he was younger, but they were fairly unmanageable, curling into a floofed out mess most of the time.

“Remember when you had curls back in college? You looked very handsome,” Panchito said absently. “But I also like your short hair.”

Donald huffed and turned his head again so the world was blotted out. The fingers continued running through his hair. That was good, he liked that.

“Donal’... are you doing alright since the adventure? You have been very tired,” José asked. Donald let out a mumble, refusing to move again.

“Family is a lot,” he managed to say, trying to snuggle further into

Panchito's lap. He was rewarded by a chuckle.

"Your family is very energetic," Panchito agreed.

"And very clingy, these past few days," José added mildly.

Donald grumbled again.

"One can hardly blame your sobrinhos for being worried, under the circumstances," José continued.

"Wish the others would help," Donald sighed, not really thinking about it. "Gonna scare them if I break down."

Silence, for a while. Just fingers in his hair, and a gentle beak preening his feathers. He relaxed, absently preening the feathers below his face, but lazily. Panchito shivered, sensitive, and his legs shook with suppressed giggles under Donald's head.

"Do you need to break down?" José asked. Donald hummed in response. "Do you need a break, Donald?"

"Not gonna get one." Whispered into Panchito's chest.

"Donal'." Sighed over his head. "If you need a break, we can find a way."

"How?" He demanded, a bit more awake now. "There's too much on

my plate and nobody that can really take any *off* until the Blot is caught. I can't even breathe at *home.* Kids need me, they won't go to Della or Scrooge."

"What if you ask Della or Scrooge to step in, instead of waiting for the kids to go to them?" José asked.

Donald… didn't know. He would have thought it was obvious he was struggling, from the outside (clearly José and Panchito had seen it), and couldn't they just *notice* it for once?

And if he was being honest with himself, he didn't want to ask. Didn't want to admit to Scrooge and Della he couldn't handle this, that he was hitting his limit and needed help from them. Asking his family for help hadn't been great for him, historically. They were smug about it, they ignored what he *said* he needed for what they *thought* he needed instead, and they would bring it up until he actually *did* die.

With his luck, Della would take his request for help as a sign she was right about adventures and drag them all out come hell or highwater, which was the *last* thing he needed.

His silence seemed to be an answer itself.

"You don't trust them to handle it," José surmised, sighing.

"I trust them to keep them physically safe," Donald replied hesitantly. "Emotionally… The boys need to talk things through, and they don't seem interested in talking to me yet. But Scrooge and Della both have a problem with listening."

“And now you have a problem with talking,” Panchito said, mostly to himself, but Donald flinched nonetheless.

“I’m sorry.” He murmured to the ceiling. “I don’t mean to be.”

Quiet, for a while. Just soft breathing.

“You do trust us, Donal’?” Panchito asked. His voice was soft.

“With my life. With my *kids’* lives,” Donald answered immediately. No hesitation. He’s never considered otherwise.

“Then tell us about the rest,” José requested. “The Blot, your work. You *say* that nothing can be done until he is caught, but perhaps talking will help find a solution.”

“Or at least make you feel better?” Panchito added, fingers still running through Donald’s curls, but it felt less comforting now, too much touching at once. He made a slight movement to dislodge the hand, and it pulled away to gently rest on his shoulder instead. That… that was better.

He turned his head to look at the ceiling, staring at the wooden slats. Trust, he reminded himself, he trusted them. And he needed help.

“We haven’t even *seen* the Blot,” he said. “We know he’s been selling or offering to sell power cells to a few different criminals, but we don’t know what his actual goal is. Nobody has gone missing this time around.”

“That is good news!” Panchito pointed out.

“But it means we have no idea what he’s doing to fill the cells, if he’s found a pile of magical artifacts or- I don’t know,” Donald explained, gesturing vaguely with one hand before letting it flop back to his side.

“Maybe no news is good news,” José said carefully. “If most magic users are in the wind, perhaps the Blot is not able to gather as much magic, and this is why you have not found him.”

Or there were victims they didn’t know about. Something he was missing.

“Why is he called the Blot, anyway?” Panchito asked, clearly trying to lighten the mood a bit. Donald allowed it with a snort.

“His real name is Joseph Crisse, but he doesn’t use it anymore. He got hit by one of his own machines and it left him permanently scarred,” he explained. “Weird black gloopy stuff all over his face. I think he’s still got a magical signature, actually, he didn’t know how to close the connection.”

José took a breath.

“Couldn’t we use that to track him?” He asked; Donald blinked, sitting up.

“I- yes? Yes, if we had a sample, or something to compare to, but-“ and he slumped again. “But I’ve been all over his original files, and he took everything with him when he escaped, there’s nothing to use.”

“But now you can be on the lookout for something, even if he is no longer at the location,” José reminded him.

True. But it felt like another drop in the bucket, one more potential lead that he couldn’t actually *use.*

“We think the red-haired woman you saw is working for him,” Donald continued, glancing briefly up at Panchito, who looked pleased.

“But we saw her in Duckburg! That is a possible lead, yes?”

“Yes, it is. We’re planning a raid,” Donald confirmed. “Even if the base was abandoned, if he *was* working in Duckburg, there should be some evidence left…”

“That’s good!”

“But that’s all we have,” Donald muttered. “We don’t know who broke him out of prison, we don’t know *why,* we don’t have any idea where he’s based or why he’s selling his power cells this time, hell, he could be *dead* and someone is just using his plans!”

“Has Paperinik made any progress?” José asked, and Donald… froze.

He’d forgotten, he’d *forgotten* that they didn’t know. How had he done that? Drake knew, even, but José and Panchito didn’t? His partners?

They knew almost everything else.

(*what was Donald without his secrets?*)

Panchito's face in the dark car, begging him to tell them when he needed help. José curled around his legs asking him to share what he was struggling with.

Green, soft wind wrapping him in cool air while red warmth handled the burning, aching thing that had nearly killed him-

Sitting on this couch, feeling frost crawl up his ankles while Panchito desperately tried to get the fire burning, find enough blankets to suffocate him but he couldn't hold any heat, the ice was underneath even his feathers. José sweating, shaking, swearing it was a terrible idea, please Donald, not *this.* The spell finally leaving his fingers and hitting Donald's chest, the instant relief and warmth, the ever-present taste of salt leaving him for that moment.

Briefly, Scrooge sitting alone, in his dark office, staring at the monitor screens and ignoring everything Donald was saying, screaming, *would you just* talk to me!

-Transmission Lost-

"I am Paperinik," Donald said.

He closed his eyes. Waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Finally, a breath across his legs.

“I was hoping you had another ally in the wings,” José groaned. “Deus, Donald, when do you *sleep?”*

“I think we know he does not!” Panchito said brightly, fingers in Donald’s hair again. That was fine, he felt less overwhelmed now.

“Not surprised?” He asked the darkness behind his eyelids.

“At you, amor? Never,” Panchito whispered, placing a kiss on the top of Donald’s head. “Pretending to be your own best friend was very clever.”

“Mickey was so mad when that article came out,” Donald chuckled. “Offended that some *random hero* was claiming to be *my* friend, when clearly it was between *him* and *Goofy!* Almost challenged Paperinik to a fight over it, except he could never find the guy. ”

José snorted a laugh, nearly tumbling off the couch. Panchito was shaking a bit.

“He didn’t take it well when I confirmed it either,” Donald continued cheerfully, feeling a bit more in control, “Didn’t talk to me for a week.”

“However did you make it up to him?” José asked, twisting to correct his balance.

“Agreed to try out for the fall play,” Donald recalled. “They rewrote the lines so someone would repeat whatever I had just said every time I had to talk, since nobody could understand a word I was saying.”

Panchito was outwardly giggling now. José shook his head with a grin.

Donald let out a garbled noise in as serious a tone as he could manage; José nodded sagely.

“I agree, Donald, we *should* continue discussing your emotional state,” he said, and Donald scowled, grumbling under his breath.

“Yes, Donal’, we *are* making good progress!” Panchito managed to stutter out while giggling.

“Phooey,” Donald muttered.

“Don’t you feel a touch better?” José asked.

“Nope.”

“Tiny bit?” Panchito asked, leaning over to look Donald in the eye. He stubbornly shut his eyes, shaking his head.

“Just a little?” José continued, and Donald could see the rest of the night going to this nonsense, and sighed.

“A bit,” he admitted. “But it’s… draining.”

Exhausting. But also a bit freeing, like he’d released the pressure built up through his back and shoulders, but the tension had been all that was holding him upright, and now he couldn’t stand, could barely keep himself awake.

He wanted to. *God,* he wanted to find the energy somewhere; not just for his obligations, but maybe a brief respite for himself.

One day. One evening even, just for him, to do what he wanted. No adventures, no crises, just relaxation.

But he couldn’t. He *knew* he couldn’t, it wasn’t something available to him. It wasn’t something that had been an option in a long, long time.

“Come on, don’t be a Downer Don!”

“Old Cape, there’s a robbery on 12th and-”

“Donald! We need to get to Twilight Town!”

“There’s been a sighting of Felldrake in-”

“Donald…”

“Unca Donald”

“Help!”

“Please.”

“Donal’?”

“I’m just tired of… things going wrong,” he said to the ceiling. “Even good things are too *much.* ”

It’s jumbled, nonsensical, but he could feel Panchito nodding anyway, like it made any sense. Like Donald did.

“You carry many things, amor,” he whispered to Donald’s forehead, the tip of his comb fluttering in Donald’s view. “Even good things can be heavy at times.”

“I wasn’t- I got back in because I was *bored,”* he confessed. “They didn’t need me, nobody knew that the Blot was out yet-”

“And you would have rejoined when they did,” José pointed out. “Things would have still happened, but you were, ah, already back in the swing of things. And most bored people find a new hobby; you decided to help fight crime. That is not greedy, or selfish, or whatever it is that is making you frown so much.”

“It’s just- I would be less overwhelmed if I wasn’t focused on keeping these secrets. If I had waited until they called in PK I wouldn’t even have to pretend…”

But Donald felt too exposed without the masks and secrets blocking anyone from seeing the full picture. Didn’t want SHUSH to have any more information in their laps in case Ravenson became the next Hooter, didn’t want Fenton or Drake to know he was part of the agency that was helping and hindering them in equal measure, focused on SHUSH style dealings while Drake wanted to move faster, or pushing the science past where Fenton would comfortably go-

Didn’t want Mickey to know how spread thin he was the next time Kingdom Hearts came calling, because what would it change, truly? The spell wouldn’t let him back out, he was as beholden to the summons as a mage to their king’s command. Mickey didn’t push it, Donald didn’t truly think he knew the extent to which he and Goofy were held by the spell, but- he couldn’t make Mickey feel guilty for calling them. There were lives at stake, and Mickey was a King. Kings had to make unfair decisions; Donald would not make that harder than it already was.

His family couldn’t know, they would push and prod and get involved and he couldn’t do what he needed to do if he was constantly looking over his shoulders. They wouldn’t trust his experience, had to confirm everything on their own, had to poke their beaks into every detail no matter the danger of doing so, because Donald wasn’t trusted alone.

They would leap without looking and he would have to catch them, and he could do that as *Donald,* but he couldn’t as Paperinik. Couldn’t as Double Duck, as Court Mage, as a Caballero, because those roles were bigger than this, bigger than who he loved and who he would protect with his life (but he couldn’t sacrifice the universe for them, and he *would,* he knew he would if it came right to it-)

Couldn't spend his time defending his children, his babies, when he needed to fight the dragon or the giant robot or the alien invasion. He had to be able to put them aside, and the easiest way to do it was to make sure they weren't behind him, following (or was it hiding?) right at his back while he faced the unknown. If he turned back to look he wouldn't leave. So they couldn't be there if he turned back.

It was that simple. If he wasn't Donald, nobody worried and nobody needed him.

Except when it wasn't simple; when Scrooge had been pale and grey reading the reports that Paperinik was dead, when Donald was still recovering and hadn't made it home fast enough to beat the morning papers. His relief when Donald had walked through the doors, his scathing dismissal of PK's 'antics' a moment later. His regretful face a moment after that, when Donald's face contorted because PK was as good as dead without Uno, and *Uno* was-

When Gladstone desperately sought him out at a party and only looked more terrified when Donald hadn't been himself. The frantic fear only turned away when Donald dragged him out.

"You have many reasons for your secrecy," José said quietly. "Some I disagree with, some I do not know. But you have reasons, and some are good."

"Some are stupid and we all know it."

He received a snort of laughter.

"Perhaps you like to think of yourself as dark and mysterious! Like a *luchador* ! Like me!" Panchito offered, trembling with quiet giggles as he spoke.

“I had my mask before I met you,” Donald grumbled, forcing a scowl over his smile. Because Panchito always, always knew how to cut the tension with all the subtlety of a bull in a china shop and twice as much amusement in the process.

“It’s like fate meant for us to meet!” Panchito insisted at that, and Donald lost the fight and smiled. He glanced down at José, watching them both with a soft smile.

“You’ve got a masked persona too, *Green Bat,* ” he pointed out, and at that José’s smile turned brighter. “Guess we’re a matched set now.”

“We should all go out together!” Panchito enthused, while José continued to smile, and alright, *fine,* Donald did feel better. They always made him feel better, even if he didn’t want to. Even when he wanted to wallow, just a bit, in his anger or his melancholy. Just a moment longer, let him stew in dark emotions before he sighed, rolled up his sleeves, and went to fix whatever was broken.

“Oh!” Donald exclaimed, shooting upwards and nearly crashing into Panchito’s chin.

“Ach!”

“Donald?”

“Scrooge asked if our band would play at an investor party!”

“He *what?!”*

That announcement thoroughly derailed the whole night, which Donald was endlessly relieved about. He felt better, sure, and José was insisting he would handle both the SHUSH magic lessons and start making more serious inquiries about Morgana's vague warning, but he was *tired.* He wanted to relax and joke with his partners, not think about the Blot or his recent near-death experience and the downpour of emotional baggage that it had brought with it.

So instead he sleepily contributed to their proposed setlist, let Panchito declare he would negotiate their pay with Scrooge because why not, they didn't actually need the money. It was more the principal of it than anything else, José said cheerfully, so as long as they *did* get paid, it was fine.

"It is a sign of respect to pay your friends and family properly," José said blandly, not looking at Donald directly, "Let's see how Scrooge handles the request to do so."

Donald, who had worked for Scrooge for next-to-nothing and literally nothing at varying times in his life, felt pretty called out and huffed. He was soundly ignored.

Fine, they could argue money with Scrooge, while he… he fell back asleep. Panchito was warm and Donald was always a bit cold. It didn't *bother* him. Mostly. But he still loved to be warm, *properly* warm.

Maybe not on fire, though. He'd had enough of that.

Lazy Mornings and Busy Evenings

Donald slept late.

Well, that wasn't quite correct. He *woke* on time for him, the moment the sun rose, but he refused to get *up,* lying in bed with José while Panchito slipped out to crow at the sunrise, taking the egg with him for his morning song.

It had taken a few years to break Panchito of the habit of crowing in their bedroom.

Donald did *not* miss that. There was being awake for the sunrise and there was being *happy* about it.

José huffed as the sun drifted across his eyes. Donald shifted his shoulder until it blocked the light, watching the slight frown on José's face melt away. Unlike the two of them, José could sleep until noon without issue, staying up all hours of the night instead.

Donald shifted a bit further, so he could watch the light move over José's feathers. There was a slightly iridescent sheen to them, at the right angle; a slight hint of blue and yellow under the vibrant green. Donald let himself fall into a doze, watching the feathers shift color to color as the sun rose.

He didn't want to get up. He *had* to, he had that mission with the other heroes tonight, not to mention prepping for the *SHUSH* mission after that…

His chest throbbed.

Green. Yellow. Blue. José frowned again as the light crossed his face, but Donald couldn't block it this time without actually getting up.

José flicked his hand on top of the sheets, eyes never even twitching, and the curtains tugged themselves closed, casting the room in complete darkness. Donald chuckled.

"It is far too early," José muttered into the pillows.

"Panchito's been up for hours," Donald replied in a murmur. José sniffed.

"And he is insane," he replied. Donald snorted a laugh and started to sit up.

"Must you?" José asked, still refusing to open his eyes, while Donald sighed.

"Got a full day. I can't stay too long."

"Anything we can help with?" Panchito asked, walking through the bedroom door with a tray full of toast and eggs. José was abruptly sitting up, looking at the tray with interest. Donald leaned forward to steal a mug of coffee, ignoring the food for the moment.

"Not for this one," he said regretfully. "But I have help tonight, don't worry."

José, face buried in his coffee, mumbled something into the steam.

Panchito chuckled.

“Your hero friends? Or SHUSH ones?” He translated, while Donald breathed out, reminding himself that they knew about both now. He could just… talk about these things now.

What a wonder. It was a relief. And it was nauseating.

“Hero friends, this time. SHUSH mission in a few days, but we’re not expecting any danger on that one,” Donald answered quietly. Like if he said it softly, it wouldn’t feel quite as significant. Just a work update, nothing important. Not a secret he had kept longer than they had known him.

“Oh? Do tell!” José requested, perking up a bit, while Panchito nodded eagerly. Donald’s beak twisted.

“We’re… looking at the house of a recently deceased suspect…” He started, frowning, trying to find something actually fun about this. Surely they didn’t want to hear about a dead man?

“For what?! Secret hidden documents about the end of the world?!” Panchito demanded immediately.

“Proof he isn’t actually dead?” José suggested casually, and Panchito’s eyes went even wider.

“He was replaced by his evil twin!”

“Or cloned in a lab?”

“Maybe even-”

Donald considered clarifying, but they were gaining speed now, louder and louder, and he let himself fall back, curling around his mug and poking absently at the food.

“Oh, what if he secretly *was* the Phantom Blot!”

Donald twitched.

“I’m pretty sure someone would have noticed the pulsing black scar on his face if he was,” he muttered, aiming for levity and missing by a country mile. Two pairs of dark eyes latched onto his face.

“Ah yes, the scar,” José said after a moment. “I forgot about the scar. You said it was magical?"

“It’s some kind of weird spell reaction,” Donald explained, though he didn’t know much of the details himself.

“He said it happened during one of his experiments, left him permanently scarred by ‘the chaos of dark magic’.” He added in a mocking tone. “Like it would earn him sympathy or something. Wouldn’t have happened if he wasn’t torturing people, of course, but he wouldn’t admit *that.”*

“Dark magic?” José asked curiously, head tilting to one side.

“ *He* says it was, but I have no idea, I wasn’t trained last time I met him,” Donald answered.

“Pity about that,” José mused. “We could track him if you had, even without a sample. A curse like that is fairly unique.”

It was. The Blot was *very* unique, magical signature-wise. If only Donald had thought to keep *something* of his around, but he hadn’t thought he would ever *escape.*

“What about the power… battery things he makes?” Panchito asked, pushing breakfast a bit closer to Donald to try and entice him to actually eat it. “Can you track those?”

“If they’re active, maybe, but when they’re not in use, they’re kept in lead-lined cases. Can’t get a read on them until the case is open, and they’re so unstable that they’ve exploded every time we’ve found them,” Donald answered with a sigh. “And even I can’t keep a constant tracking spell up just in case one goes live.”

Well, no, he probably *could,* if he wanted to do absolutely nothing else. Like eat.

“And he’s not the one using the cells anyway,” he added. “I don’t know if they’re being used by anyone else, the ones we’ve found have all been unrelated to him as far as we can see.”

“He wasn’t interested in other criminals before, was he?” Panchito asked, poking Donald again when he stopped eating. Donald huffed, shoveling another bite of eggs into his mouth.

“No,” he answered, when he had swallowed, “No, he was pretty focused on only magic users. Our best theory right now is that whoever broke him out of prison has their own reasons for it, and the Blot is either willingly helping, or…”

“Not willingly helping,” Panchito finished.

“Yeah…”

They continued asking questions as they ate, piecemeal getting the current theories about FOWL’s potential involvement and who Acosta actually was. Panchito was disappointed that he was not in fact a clone; Donald assured him that when he found an evil clone, he’d be the first to know. Which mollified him slightly.

Donald considered mentioning the confirmed cloning cases they already knew of, just briefly, just to add to the fun, but tossed the thought away. Even if he kept it anonymous, it was too close to revealing the Warners’ origins for his tastes.

He briefly recalled their rescue mission; the screaming, the cold, the aching pain and desperation of ‘ *get this done and get out alive’* because the triplets were at Goofy’s and he needed to get back to them.

Why couldn’t he have fun missions to talk about?

When he finally extracted himself, slowly, unwillingly, reluctantly, he made his way to the SHUSH building. He avoided meeting anyone as he went through the halls. He didn’t have a good reason to do it, honestly a distraction would probably be nice considering his evening

plans, but he just really didn't feel up to it.

Honestly, he probably *should* feel something about the mission later. Something like guilt, specifically, for going around SHUSH rules to investigate on his own.

But he was so *sick* of having nothing concrete on the Blot, or what the weapons were intended for, and the idea of waiting even *longer* for them to get off their hands to go and take a peek when the last time they had been even *close* to the Blot they'd been too late to get anything concrete-

Well. He had no interest in waiting. This was exactly the kind of thing that Paperinik ought to be doing; Double Duck would just have to deal with it.

His email, as promised, contained the exact plans for the investigation. Flight times, the other assigned agents (he didn't know any of them personally besides 330), a list of mission goals and a complete itinerary upon arrival on location.

It was more detailed than he liked. Donald preferred to have *some* kind of plan, but this level of preparation was the exact thing he was trying to train his students *out* of. Too much foreplanning tended to make them think too rigidly, do everything to get back on track if something went wrong, instead of rolling with the punches and letting things change if necessary.

It *was* C4's mission. Donald wouldn't interfere unless he had to; he would just have to deal with it, and talk with 330 afterwards. The younger agent was doing well, but he was still a new agent and this would only be his fourth field mission. But having another mission commander should help him get a feel for varying command styles; it was exactly what Donald had recommended in the first place when

330 had been assigned to him.

So why was he so worried?

He shook his head. He had enough to worry about, he could worry about the mission when he was on it. Which… reminded him. There was no way this would wrap up in a day; the flight time alone meant they would be gone for at least three, and that was assuming that everything went perfectly along with C4's plans.

Which meant he had to tell his family he would be out of town for a few days.

They were *already* unhappy about how much time he had to spend at work, and so soon after their recent adventure…? He was going to have a major fight on his hands.

Not to mention the *egg*. He'd agreed to the mission for a number of reasons, but thinking about the egg made him hesitate. Should he stay home? José and Panchito should be able to handle the double schedule, and his family would be around if they needed someone last minute, but… Donald didn't like to be away that long. He'd taken the teaching role so he could be around as much as possible, but he'd known SHUSH would probably fly him all over the place if they could; he'd been banking on the kids hardly noticing the difference with their own globe trotting.

But an *egg*…

His partners hadn't been concerned when he mentioned it. They'd had no concerns besides a general one for his safety, they didn't say he should stay back. Surely if they thought it was fine, he shouldn't overthink it, right?

Donald was spinning himself in circles; he had to make a decision and *now.*

Donald: how badly do you think everyone will take it when i tell them i have to go out of town for work again?

Bentina: The Costa Rica one, I assume?

Bentina: I imagine they won't be pleased by you being out of their direct line of sight for so long. Some more than others.

Donald: yeah, thats the issue

Donald: but im already slated to be the field commander, and this is still loosely a blot case

Bentina: I wasn't aware he was the main focus of your mission

Donald: the mission is to figure out what he knew about the auction sellers/buyers. Personal theory is that he may have been killed for what he knew

Donald: I am going specifically because i think hes more involved with the blot than weve been able to confirm

Donald: even if he isnt, theres a chance that there was a bigger plan at work with his murder

Bentina: My own sources seem to think that his assistant stole everything on site and vanished

Donald: if his assistant is still alive and free i will eat my hat

Donald: anyway, if youve got any advice ill take it

She didn't respond for some time. Donald set his phone aside and continued to read the mission itinerary. Speak with local agents, he wanted to take 330 to that part at a minimum, working with different law enforcement groups was important.

Break into the villa…? If they had the cooperation from the locals, they wouldn't need to break in… Was C4 expecting them to be stonewalled? Why talk to them at all? Distraction?

Oh, no, possibly bribery. There was an attached report indicating the local law was probably corrupt. C4 had even included a bribe in the mission budget, which was the exact kind of ridiculousness that SHUSH bureaucracy produced. Still, not a bad plan to have a plan in place if they were expecting corrupt officials.

Especially given the players Acosta had been working with. Even if the locals were normally on the up and up, if FOWL *was* involved with the auction, that was a much bigger fish. Not to mention the confirmed warlords and mercenaries they already knew had been at the auction. And threats weren't off the table; killing a local millionaire could have been an implicit threat to others.

It still rubbed him the wrong way to plan both to negotiate with the local police *and* to break in, with no notes about what they might do if

they came to an agreement.

Not his mission. C4 had plenty of reason to think this plan was necessary, he needed to let go if he didn't want to end up getting into a pissing contest with his fellow agent.

Donald closed the mission details. This wasn't helping him.

He pulled his phone out again.

Donald: ill probably be gone all week on this new job, heads up

Panchito: so long! We shall miss you so much!

Panchito: you should call us every night!

José: what has your family said?

Panchito: CAN you call us???

Donald: probably not, but i can text; my coworkers are nosy people, theyll probably be listening

Donald: and i… havent told them yet

José: DOnald!

Donald: i didnt want to do it over text!

Panchito: did you not know about this yesterday?

Donald: …

Donald: alright im avoiding telling them

Donald: it was never this hard to go before!

José: recent events aside, how have you been leaving for work before this? This is not your first overnight trip, is it?

Donald: no, it isnt. I just said i had to travel for one reason or another and would call them when i landed.

Donald: the kids werent too happy about it, but they werent TOO bad about it either?

Donald: honestly given how many adventures theyve been going on i dont think they really noticed how long i was gone

Donald: they only really notice when im gone and they arent

Panchito: could you encourage them to go on their own trip while youre gone?

José: Donald, I am sure thats not true

Donald: …

Donald: I dont know if theyre ready for another adventure. Della's been pushing hard about it, but…

José: Donald

Donald: i only meant that its not as noticeable when im gone if theyre not home anyway. Out of sight and all

Silence. Donald groaned, glancing around his office for a distraction. He didn't have much here, too risky to have anything personal, and it seemed like a waste of time filling his office with trinkets or decorations when he'd barely been using it.

Well, now he was using it, and it was boring.

330's small desk, tucked into the corner, had a few framed pictures, but Donald hadn't looked at them. He doubted they were of anyone, 330 was smarter than that, but they may still be personal; art or photos of places 330 had gone, something like that. None of Donald's business.

He did have a window to look out of, which was nice. The glass was tempered, so nobody could see inside in any detail, but he could see out.

Unfortunately, all it looked out at was another office building across the street. The floor across from him was also tempered, reflecting the empty reflection of his own building. Nothing showing nothing, into infinity.

His phone buzzed.

Bentina: Might I recommend a distraction? They may not be as bothered by your absence if they are doing something else.

Oh for-

Donald groaned, sliding the phone away from him. Was that going to be everyone's advice?

The alarms on the roof of Ducklair Tower went off once, then twice, and Donald opened the doors with a sigh. He'd tried to catch a cat nap after work, texting that he was going to be home late in case anyone came looking at the houseboat, but he'd ended up pacing the floor until their meeting time.

Gizmo appeared first, looking frazzled and unhappy, Darkwing a moment behind him. As promised, Gizmo was carrying a few takeout bags in one hand, the plastic straining between his large gauntlets.

"I'm still uncertain about this breaking and entering idea," Gizmoduck started in immediately, while Donald turned to look at them both. "We should get a warrant or *something."*

“We’re not cops, we don’t need to build a court case,” Darkwing retorted. “Our bigger concern is if the Blot left any evidence behind! We need to move in before he has a chance to destroy it all and we lose our trail!”

“Potential trail,” Donald jumped in, and they both turned to look at him,appearing startled; they’d clearly forgotten he was there.

“Right; can you explain what this is about? Your message was rather vague,” Gizmo asked sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head. Donald nodded slowly.

“This is a bit…” he paused, considering. Gizmoduck was working closely with SHUSH; Darkwing was not. Revealing to either of them that he had an inside source there could cause issues, but *not* saying it put his information in doubt.

Then again…

Gladstone had been in both locations. Who said he needed to refer to SHUSH at all?

“... a bit complicated to explain, so bear with me,” he continued slowly, and they both tuned in.

Stagnant

“So, there’s some kind of weird magic around the building keeping Gladstone from getting anywhere near it, and a person of interest from SHUSH was seen outside,” Darkwing summarized thoughtfully, mouth full of lo mein. Donald nodded, taking a moment to stuff his own face before swallowing noisily. He’d had to adjust the facts a bit, just in case someone asked about why they were going, but only enough to give everyone plausible deniability.

“Essentially, yes. She was positively identified by SHUSH, and Gladstone apparently recognized her from a party where the Blot’s power cells were sold; we just don’t know how she’s related to everything.”

“If she bought the cells, she may have been a target, not an accomplice,” Gizmo pointed out. “SHUSH believes that the Phantom Blot is selling the unstable cells to rivals of some kind, since the two times they’ve been in action they exploded unexpectedly.”

“He could just be bad at his job,” Darkwing argued. “Decade or so in prison, maybe he’s lost his edge.”

“Hell of a gamble to sell them if they’re not up to par,” Donald said. “Apparently Mme Rouge said they were unstable when she bought them, so clearly she at least knew they could be dangerous.”

“Why buy them, if you know they’re messy? The Blot’s got a motive for making them this way, but what did *she* get from it? Or the other guy, what’s his name, why buy them if you just need an energy source?” Darkwing asked.

“Dr. Ghast, and he’s still not talking, so we don’t know how he even

got them, let alone why," Gizmoduck answered absently, scanning some data on a projection from his forearm.

"Wasn't he trying to summon some kind of eldritch god?" Donald asked. "He might have thought a magic power source would do the job better."

Which wasn't actually that bad of a thought, he noted to himself. Science and magic were hard to meld. If you could get a magic power source in a power cell instead of a crystal, that was one less step to integrating, if that was your goal.

He went back to eating for a few minutes, while they argued over his head.

"You're saying Gladstone Gander saw this? Gladstone, the guy that wishes for a drink and one falls into his hands from the sky?" Darkwing asked, frowning. Donald had to wonder who he'd been talking to. He'd met him over the last few days, but Gladstone's reputation had clearly preceded him.

"He did, and Donald confirmed most of it. Guess his boyfriend was there too, but he didn't say why," Donald told them. Darkwing nodded, mollified, while Gizmo looked more curious. Maybe he was thinking Donald had gotten the information from SHUSH and was inventing another reason. Maybe he was going to put together the details of Donald's identities and realize what the missing piece was.

Either way, he was done eating, and the sun had set.

"Any objections to a little snooping?" He asked, and he got two serious expressions in return.

“I think it’s high time we start getting ahead of the Blot,” Darkwing replied immediately. “Let’s go.”

The theatre was a dark stain on the horizon, nearly blending into the night sky as they landed; Gizmo a gleaming distraction, Donald and Darkwing flitting shadows. Clearly a daytime hero wasn’t the best for a stealth mission, but Donald was hoping numbers would bear out here, and Gizmo had more equipment for scanning the building then he did.

The roof hatch was rusty but serviceable, even if the sound made every feather on his arms stand on end. Thankfully the sounds of traffic would cover it.

They slipped inside. The other heroes looked at Donald.

“I think we start here and work our way down,” he murmured. “Any major activity will probably be more hidden, but they could be using the old theatres for storage or something.”

Donald would admit he hadn’t thought heavily about what they would find. Probably storage, possibly what the original power cells from the auction had been intended for. Hopefully some correspondence or information on how they’d known about the cells in the first place to try and buy them.

His thoughts had largely been focused on getting that information *now,* not in a week or three or whenever SHUSH decided they had enough intel and preparation to go in themselves. He was probably letting his anxiety get the better of him, but his fellow heroes did agree it was worth checking out, so he didn’t think he’d gone off too

bad.

Hopefully. Besides, if he was wrong, it would mean there was nothing here.

The top floors were bare and dusty, the remaining projector equipment abandoned and crumbled film reels crunching under their feet. Darkwing winced when they saw them, but they pressed on silently. Gizmo was scanning as they moved, but couldn't get a read on more than a few rooms at a time; something about the building interfered with his scanners. The sound proofing, maybe. Or maybe the place was painted in lead paint, who could say. It was certainly old enough.

There were few signs of life here; a few abandoned cups and napkins in one room, a ratty scarf hidden in a corner of what appeared to be a breakroom. A fridge with something unidentifiable staining the lower shelves, a bathroom best left closed and forgotten.

The building was sturdy, at the very least; no signs of weather damage. Donald didn't even know who owned this building anymore; Gizmoduck had taken a look before they left, but hadn't been able to find the records. Someone had to at least be paying taxes on it, right? Or the city would have reclaimed it?

Of course, what would the city do with it?

Lower floors, here were the actual theatres and their moldering velvet seats, the rotting fabric on the walls peeling to the floor. It reeked of decay and rats, and somehow the smell of old movie popcorn permeated everything. It was hard to say what smelled worse, the bathroom upstairs or these rotting rooms with the odor of neglect and salt.

There were footprints here, visible in the gritty carpeting and occasionally in the filthy floors through the muck and dirt. Most of them wandered, behind the old prize counters in the arcade and tentatively into more empty theatres and back. Donald murmured to his companions that they were probably from people breaking in; this building had been abandoned for a long time even after the Evronians were forced out. He could even see the scuffs from their boots, there near the old offices.

He didn't mention that part. Mentioning a past alien invasion that he had helped cover up wasn't going to be helpful right this second. Or any other second. Donald didn't intend to mention it if he didn't have to.

The building was quiet. Almost startlingly so, given they were still in a busier area of town. It was like the noise was being eaten by the velvet wall drapings, swallowing even the hushed sound of breathing and the whisper of fabric on fabric.

They were all as quiet as they could be anyway; whispering and gesturing instead of speaking. Gizmo suggested (via text on his projected screen), they split up, but Donald vetoed the idea for the moment. They had time to explore for the moment, what they did *not* have was any idea what kind of threats they might find. If Gizmoduck's scanners couldn't actually keep track of who was where, they were not going more than a room apart.

The fact that neither hero argued with him said everything he needed to know; they were just as put off as he was.

It wasn't like old buildings were usually welcoming, especially at night, lit only by night vision goggles. Usually you found odd humming sounds or creaking floors, skittering bugs and things shifting and moving from unseen drafts. This, though… it felt empty in a

different way. Like the walls had eyes, like everything was holding its breath, holding still and silent while they walked past posters for *Tarantula* and *I Was A Teenage Werewolf*.

This building had been abandoned longer than Donald had been alive. It didn't feel happy to have guests inside its halls.

They finished the last of the main floor by circling back to the storage rooms. There were fewer signs of activity here, only a few layers of footprints, but each room they searched was nearly empty and clearly ransacked; probably popular when the place had shut down, but now anything worth taking was long since gone.

Donald didn't like this. He had *been* here before, and it hadn't unnerved him nearly as much. One would think that the Evronian fear technology would have been more off-putting, but apparently not.

"Are there any other rooms?" Darkwing asked, looking around the apparent last room and its few broken chairs. His voice was a murmur. "I thought we would see something, at least."

Donald had thought so too. They knew Mme Rouge had been here, they'd seen her leaving, but what if they were wrong about why? Maybe she'd just gotten to the entrance, was scoping it out for some use and hadn't actually moved in yet?

Maybe he'd even been *wrong,* it wasn't even her, just a doppelganger or something, it wasn't like Donald didn't know all about that-

"My scanner is picking up something else. A basement, maybe?" Gizmo offered, turning his gauntlet so they both could see it. There was a complete scan of the building now, had he been filling it out as they walked?

Just below the blinking dot that was probably them, or just Gizmoduck, there did seem to be another space. As with everything else, the reading gave out after a few feet in any direction.

"It didn't show that anywhere else in the building, so I don't think it's the foundations," Gizmo explained, while Darkwing peered closer at it. Donald nodded in agreement, turning away and peering back down the last hallway. There were no other doors. If there *was* a basement, even just a few rooms, there would have to be stairs. Or at least a trapdoor, depending on what they were using the space for, but it made no sense for it to be *hidden.*

Unless…

"Can you see when this building was built?" Donald asked quietly.

"Um, yes? Yeah, hold on, it was…" Gizmo muttered to himself, head twitching back and forth like he was looking at something besides the dark, grim room they stood in. Darkwing peered at Donald with a frown.

"PK?" Darkwing asked, before some dawning thought crossed his mind and he turned back to Gizmo with a grin. "Oh, I bet it was in the Twenties!"

Donald felt his own beak split in a smile. It felt sharp.

Gizmo blinked at them both, before his eyes went wide behind the visor.

“Oh! Yes, yes, just let me- yup, 1923! It was originally much smaller, the oldest parts of the building used to be a single theatre and some kind of social club.”

“Which I’m sure was a perfectly upstanding business,” Donald said with a smirk. “No reason to hide the entrance to a lower level if you’re just having a glass of water with friends after work.”

“None whatsoever,” Darkwing agreed, nodding, while Gizmo snorted a laugh. It made the air feel marginally lighter for a moment.

They went back into the hall. The darkness pressed in as they split up this time, speed overtaking caution when they’d already gone over this area and found nothing but the occasional body of a mouse and the never-ending smell of mildew.

The entrance was found beneath an old chunk of carpeting that wasn’t as attached to the rest as it appeared, tucked in an awkward corner of the hallway between two other rooms. Likely the floor plan had changed over the last few years, this could have all been one room and been converted.

The trapdoor opened without a sound.

Stupid, if you were using the space to hide anything; rusted hinges would give you a warning, as well as make the space seem more abandoned. Well oiled hinges in *this* room? Suspicious.

The space below was dark, but there was a halo of light just visible; a closed door in the room below them. Gizmo’s scanner couldn’t pick anything up.

They dropped silently down one by one, Darkwing and Donald catching Gizmo when he wobbled on his single wheel, the armor not really designed for this kind of mission.

They paused, looked at each other.

Donald reached out and opened the door.

They stood in a dusty hallway, lit by buzzing electric lights that were strung like party favors along the dirty walls. They may have been wall-papered once, but now whatever had been on the surface was faded and crumbled with age.

To the left, a half-rotted door hanging off of one hinge, leading into a dark abyss. There was a flicker of movement inside that could be a person, could be a curtain moving in the non-existent breeze. For a moment, he could smell kerosene, heard the crackle of a gramophone.

The air was so *still* here. Like a thick wool blanket was right over his face, like the room had never once had a breath of fresh air and resented the very implication. Like the first gasp on the Moon before he found the package of gum. Donald had been in tombs that felt less stifled.

To the right, the lights and their dense black cables ran around a corner and into somewhere else. There were roughly cut new boards here and there along the walls, reinforcing them enough to hold the lights and no further; one leaned almost violently to the left, making the top of the hall narrow almost into a ‘V’.

Donald let his eyes dart once more to the abandoned room.

The door was gone, like it was never there at all. Just a smooth wall.

He shuddered, shook it off. They trooped silently to the right.

Round the corner, down another dingy hallway, and abruptly the space transitioned into a smooth concrete block hallway, walls gleaming white and the lights changing to inset can lighting. It felt like they'd stepped into a hospital or a lab. Donald went so far as to look behind him, to confirm the wood walls from before were still *there,* and let out a breath of relief at the confirmation it was just as old and gross as before.

"Okay, so- someone's been busy expanding this," Gizmoduck breathed. "There were no permits for this kind of renovation, or I would have seen them-"

"Yeah, no kidding Gearhead, this is kinda obviously something illegal!" Darkwing hissed. "Someone's been using this place and doesn't want anyone knowing."

Donald pondered if the Blot had in fact been operating *in Duckburg* this entire time and felt sick. His family lived here, *Lena* lived here, the Cabs were just one town over, and Storkules was still trying to figure out modern living, he was nearby-

It had always been possible. The Phantom Blot had lived in Duckburg the first time around too; it was just that this time around they had no idea what he was even doing or if he'd straight up *died* during the escape or afterwards. For all Donald knew someone had tortured him for his tech and dropped his corpse in the middle of the ocean.

"Call SHUSH," he said quietly, because Paperinik wouldn't have any means of contact. "I think we're going to need backup."

Of course, that would take some time. Of course, they couldn’t leave well alone.

So they continued onwards.

The hallway only went in one direction, curving one way then another gently, with occasional rooms on either side; none had doors, so they could easily see they were all storage. Boxes of circuit boards and screws, nothing special besides the location underneath an abandoned theatre.

Darkwing was clearly antsy, flitting back and forth along the hallway like he was looking for something besides the long blankness they had found so far. Hands occasionally feeling along seams and cracks, tapping periodically.

Gizmo had to remain in the center of the hall, his shoulders were too wide to afford him much space. It was making Donald nervous, and he wondered if he’d made the right call in bringing him. Either of them, really, but he was glad for the company at the moment. Too glad to fully regret it.

Still, maybe they should have reconsidered the armor. It wasn’t really the right choice for stealth.

SHUSH answered, but it was clear they weren’t in any hurry to get there; Donald knew they could mobilize in far less time in a pinch. So they didn’t consider this worth the effort.

They continued walking. There were still no signs of life, nothing to indicate the strange space they'd found was actually *occupied*.

Certainly used more recently than the last time the building had been legally occupied, but that was still a pretty large timeframe.

Maybe this was more Evronian work.

Sure, and the earth-style lighting and electrical was because they were trying to blend in.

They came to a branch; two hallways leading from where they stood.

Of course.

“We could split up…” Gizmo was offering yet again, his scanner *still* only able to show a few feet in any given direction, the concrete walls probably blocking his sensors.

Left would lead towards the sewers, he knew that, he’d used them often enough to evade pursuers- was there enough room for these tunnels below them? Surely they couldn’t be above…

“We’re in enemy territory and have no idea what might be in either direction, the place could be swarming with enemies just around the corner,” Darkwing argued.

Center, that pointed to the harbor. There were no sewer mains that way, they would be too prone to flooding if the tide rose too high- but concrete tunnels? It wasn’t like they had had an inspector come to confirm safety regulations, but still...

“Look, I can move faster than the two of you on my wheel, I’ll go one direction-”

“Go right,” Donald ordered absently. “I think that’s a dead end, you should be able to circle back. Hopefully message each other if anything happens.”

Three grim looks, then Gizmoduck nodded and slipped down the other way. Donald hesitated for just a moment, then took off. He could question their easy acceptance of his command later.

“Why do you think it’s a dead end?” Darkwing asked quietly, falling into step.

“I think the sewer runs that direction; this way goes to the harbor, there’s not as many buildings.”

Granted, it meant this space might be prone to *flooding* instead.

They continued down the hallway, as fast as they dared. It was just as deadly quiet as before. And if the air had been stifling before, now it felt like Donald couldn’t quite catch his breath, thin as the top of a mountain. He could hear Darkwing huffing for breath as well.

He sped up. They hadn’t heard any noise, they hadn’t heard another *person-*

A hand caught his collar, dragging him back. Darkwing caught his eyes with a wild glance, tugging him backwards.

Donald strained to peer forward, trying to see what he had-

Voices. Faint, hidden under their huffing breath until they paused. Just up ahead, one of the many open doorways maybe, but much, much closer than he'd expected. He leaned forward against the grip, trying to hear.

"... gone, sir. Same as the last few tests. Maybe we should try another species."

"Hmph. Perhaps another specimen would yield better results, yes." The second voice crackled with disdain and something *rotten* and Donald. Froze.

He knew that voice.

"Of course, do we *have* another specimen?"

He knew that voice.

"No, we do not. So unless you are offering to *resolve* the issue, I would recommend you *shut your gibbering maw if you do not want to join the abominations in their pens."*

There were hands holding Donald back. They were still moving forward, Donald needed to get closer, he needed to get to where those people were so he could *rip*-

One hand clamped over his beak, muffling the building shriek of rage,

and then they *were* moving backwards, back down the hall and into one of the storage rooms they had passed-

Donald struggled for another second, fingers sliding against the armor, feeling for the seams in the material so he could *break it piece by piece, let him GO-*

“PK!”

It was just a hiss, barely a breath, but it made Donald gasp through his nose, cold clarity sliding down his spine. He needed to calm down.

Calm down before he hurt someone.

Breathe. In.

Out.

In.

Out.

He let go of the arm, and the hands slowly, cautiously, slipped away.

“Congrats, DW,” he said, in a voice that wasn’t his own. “We just found the Phantom Blot.”

Delayed Appointments

He was cold. His hands were shaking and there was nothing in his veins but ice.

The Blot sounded different, his spiraling mind screamed. Too deep, crackling in a way that wasn't reminiscent of a speaker but of something more organic; like that of shattering glass. Something about it set off every alarm in his head that there was something *wrong.*

"We need to get Gizmoduck," Donald said as though from the bottom of a well. It echoed and rippled away from him. "You should-"

"Wait, wait, what are *you* going to do?" Darkwing demanded immediately, waving his hands.

Donald took a breath.

He'd promised. This was dangerous, they had no idea the kind of backup the Blot had, but with a base this size, it was a reasonable bet he could be well supplied with assistants and weapons. Even if they hadn't run into anyone else yet. Donald should keep some back up, make sure someone was watching his back.

But he was already getting away.

But he had *promised.*

"We need to message Gizmoduck," he said, trying to calm down

through force of will. He needed to *think,* not panic. This was just another mission. Just another PK job.

“And then?”

“We follow the Blot; we have no idea how large this building is, but if we can keep eyes on him we can hopefully catch him tonight.”

And before he could overthink it, before he could let himself really consider what he was doing, Donald followed the Blot down the hallway.

Paperinik: we heard the blot. Tell shush to get their asses in gear and get here before he strolls out of the building

Gizmoduck: WHAT

Gizmoduck: done and done, where do you want me?

Darkwing: here, unless you found something more important on your end!

The taste of the Blot’s rotten magic was heavy on his tongue; along with the stagnant air, Donald felt slightly faint and nauseous. He forced himself to look into the room they’d heard the Blot in, worrying what he’d meant by *specimen-*

There was nothing inside except a pile of feathers, scattered across a gurney. There was no sign of anyone nearby, and the hallway was silent.

There was nothing he could do. If there was a victim in the building somewhere- they would search, and they would find them.

If there was anything to find.

But right now, there was nothing to be done for this person, the prior owner of the feathers. Nothing except give them justice.

Give them *vengeance.*

This hallway was as bland as the others, though some of the rooms were fancy enough to have doors now, instead of loosely stacked boxes of supplies. The door designs were… odd. Most of them were wooden, worn and rough, but others were the smooth metal he would expect in this kind of building. He spared them a quick glance, just enough to see if anyone had walked inside, before moving on.

He should be checking the rooms thoroughly. He should be clearing the space, making sure nobody could come out behind him with a weapon or sneak behind him to get back to the entrance.

He kept walking. Darkwing a silent shadow.

The air tasted of *rot.*

They came across another hallway split. One path veered in the direction of the harbor, the other looked like it might connect with the first one, or possibly dead end between the two. Darkwing met his eye, and with a gesture, he indicated the middle path and started

walking.

And then it was just Donald, and while they hadn't been talking, the lack of company as he continued walking was unpleasant.

They couldn't hear the Blot, hadn't been able to do so the whole time; he might be in the other hallway, he could have taken another hidden doorway somewhere-

But he could have just continued walking down the path, footsteps quieted by the still air; Donald couldn't sense his rotting magic in this building, it had permeated the whole structure, like a mold. Every breath tasted of something that shouldn't exist, something foul and decaying. He couldn't tell if the Blot would appear from one of the doors he passed or around the corner of the gently curving hallway-

He had to focus on walking. Walk, don't run, he needed to *hurry,* but if he went too fast he might be spotted, might lose his small advantage-

He reached what was clearly a command center; a much larger room full of computer screens, tables and what appeared to be the larger variety of power cells. None were glowing that he could see, so he had some hope that they weren't powered yet.

The Phantom Blot wasn't here.

There *was* someone here, though. The first living person he'd seen in the building so far. Someone hunched over one of the work tables, appearing drained and twitchy. She was looking right at him, one hand half raised, palm sparking with some kind of energy.

Donald considered Gandra Dee for a moment, eyebrow raised.

He knew she was a double agent, knew they were supposed to be working on getting her *out,* (and why was she out of contact if she was *here* of all places?!), but did *she* know that he knew that? Were they being observed, did he have to pretend he didn't know, aim for some double speak and hope she got the message? Message Gizmo to get here *now* so he could deal with this?

All of those options took time. Donald opted for none of them.

"Where is he?" He growled instead, looking around and disregarding her still sparking hands. Either she would attack or she wouldn't.

There were a few other hallways that branched off of this room, and one in particular he thought might lead towards an exit, based on the apparent natural light in that direction. Convenient for a speedy escape; maybe they had been noticed already and Gandra had been left behind.

"Who?" She blustered; Donald turned back to her and glared.

"The *Phantom Blot,"* he snarled, uninterested in playing mind games or delaying. "He has an appointment in *hell* that I'm here to ensure he gets to. So *where. Is. He."*

She flinched, either at his tone or his face, and looked around dubiously. Her eyes darted to the ceiling, lingering just half a second in two places before coming back to him. Donald spared a broad look around the room himself, looking where she had while trying to keep his head angled so it wasn't obvious.

Cameras. So they *were* being watched.

"Why should I tell *you?"* Gandra sneered, forcing herself to her feet. Donald didn't know her very well, so maybe he wasn't the best judge, but she didn't sound very villainous. He'd heard villains; Xehanort, the Blot, Raider, Steelbeak and even one brief encounter with Black Heron herself. Gandra didn't talk like a villain.

Mostly she just sounded scared and tired.

Something to worry about later. Right now, he flicked his hand in her direction.

"This isn't a fight you want to start," he warned her. Cover or not, he had neither the time nor the patience to get into a brawl with a lackey. She scowled back at him, face twisting to irritation. She didn't move to stop him *doing* anything, just stood there with her arms extended to show off whatever it was that made them spark with energy. Donald had no idea what her goal was, nor did he particularly care, so he turned to his gauntlet.

Paperinik: so gandra dee is here fyi

Gizmoduck: she WHAT

Then he shot the table in between them with a low-power energy blast from his gauntlet and dove for one of the other side halls, the one that *didn't* appear to go outside. The taste of rot was ever-present, but it seemed *slightly* lessened here, just a bit older. Could he trust that sense, though? He didn't know for *sure* that he was sensing things correctly, he hadn't been around the Blot in so long, he didn't know if he could trust his senses-

The table, which had previously been covered in all manner of delicate machinery and electronics, let out a satisfyingly large burst of flames when it was struck and the whine of the doodads and gizmos on it more than covered his growl of annoyance as he doubled back to the probable-exit. Gandra was where he'd left her, coughing and cursing, waving a hand in front of her face to clear the air.

No, this hall didn't seem any more awful than the others, which left the last branch, the one Gandra stood in front of. Was she left behind as a guard?

She was diving away from the doorway though, towards a fire extinguisher. Donald considered taking her out, but opted to use the distraction for what it was and continue on to the opening behind her, hoping he'd be able to sense *something.*

Gizmoduck: im on my way! Shush said eta 38 minutes

Darkwing: where tf are you both i swear this building moved around

Paperinik: ;akljsh/anegv

Donald dodged away before Gandra could get another hit in, worried what her weapons might do to the gauntlet without the shield up. She raised both hands again, fire extinguisher abandoned behind her, light arcing between her two palms. She reached forward again; Donald dropped and kicked out her legs.

She went down but recovered before he could take advantage, rolling back to her feet and diving at him again. He dodged to the side, wary of her outstretched hands, and glanced at the table. This one held the

power cells.

One power cell had a slight glow.

He had to leap backwards again, this time from the fire extinguisher being thrown at his head, darting closer to the burning table, and the cell wobbled.

“Wait-”

The next attempted blow knocked it clear off the table.

Straight into the sparking fire.

Donald got one very brief view of Gandra’s panicked expression before he felt the power start to surge, and he dragged her to his side to activate the shield before he could think further.

“If you damage the gauntlet, we both die,” he did bother to warn, but she didn’t seem inclined to do anything save stare, as the cell overloaded and exploded.

Donald’s back slammed into the wall, but the shield held. Gandra shuddered at the impact.

They watched as the tables rusted and corroded, the fire flickering out and the remaining components crumbled into dust and burnt rubber.

The blast didn't last long, only a few moments at best, but it still set Donald's teeth on edge. He could taste stagnant air on his tongue. It felt like he was standing in the middle of the Beagle's dump, swimming in sewage in the middle of summer. It felt like the Realm of Darkness if it developed a mold problem.

It was going to make finding the Blot much harder, with that damned cursed magic lingering over everything.

The last shockwave ended, and Donald let Gandra go, eyeing her before glancing up at the ceiling. The cameras were still there, but unless they didn't actually need their lenses to record he was fairly certain they were non-functional.

Gandra was gasping for air. Not to the point of a panic attack, but clearly in shock. He looked back at her with a sigh.

"Gizmoduck will probably be here soon," he said, as kindly as he could manage. "If you want him to take you into custody, you can probably wait here."

She glanced back at him, and her breath stuttered while her eyes narrowed.

"Why… would I want… that?" She asked, managing a doubtful tone despite the gasping. He eyed her. So either she didn't know that he knew, or she didn't know they were no longer being recorded.

"In my experience, the Blot doesn't really care for his subordinates," he said, less kindly. "And FOWL certainly doesn't reward *failure* ."

She glared at him. He glared back, then glanced down the last hallway.

"Which way did they go?" He asked. "I don't care what you do when I leave, just point me in the right direction."

He ran.

Gandra hadn't seen the Blot (which didn't bode well, how many tunnels were there?), but the other person had apparently gone towards their *underground boat dock,* which this base had, and if they weren't fleeing before, they certainly would be *now.* The explosion had been small, but it was hardly subtle. If there had been anyone else in the building (Gandra hadn't said), they were probably getting alerts already.

He pushed his legs to move, go faster, faster, *faster-*

The ground grew colder. Damp. The air reeked of decaying seaweed, and the walls had a noticeable mildew problem along the corners. The hall dipped ever-so slightly downwards, the slope barely noticeable unless one was full-out sprinting down it, feet skittering and stumbling over each other as he pushed them to go just a bit further.

If the prior hallways had been simple affairs, *this* was a labyrinth, doors every which way, mostly open and dark inside; the paths felt like they were twisting and twining but never crossing, just occasional branches; he had to trust his senses and his innate ability to find water.

He could just hear the waves, unless that was the pounding in his ears, or his desperate imagination-

Darkwing: PK. I found prisoners

Darkwing: live ones

He.

He kept running.

If they caught him they could circle back through the building and save everyone, but if he got *away-*

SHUSH wouldn't be here in time, he needed to catch up, he needed his legs to go *faster-*

Gizmoduck: eta 22 minutes for shush

Gizmoduck: pk where are you???

He could feel corrupted magic. It permeated the building, he'd been all but drenched in it since they arrived, he could no longer tell if it was getting worse or if it was just making him sick.

Was he getting closer to the Blot? Or something else?

The ground leveled out. He skidded to a halt, just before a set of double doors right in front of him, painted the same off-white as the

rest of the hallway, nearly invisible until he was about to smash his beak into it.

Donald couldn't tell if anyone was on the other side. There were no windows, he couldn't hear anything over the waves, and he couldn't trust his senses at this point, nothing felt right.

The heavy doors were cracked but not open all the way; he couldn't quite see beyond them. He could hear water.

Gizmoduck: PK WHERE ARE YOU

Gizmoduck: Gandra says there are booby traps everywhere please tell me youre okay!

Darkwing: i cant get these cells open! Could use your help gearhead!

Paperinik: im fine

Gizmoduck: finally!

Darkwing: did you fall into a hole or something?!

Paperinik: im at the doors to an underground boat dock

Gizmoduck: omw

Paperinik: how many prisoners, DW

Darkwing: 17 occupied cells, some of them have more than one person. And a few empty cells.

Darkwing: nobody here speaks a language i know

Paperinik: i might be able to translate

Darkwing: only if you speak winged-taloned bird creature

Paperinik: they have HARPIES?!

Darkwing: is that what they are?

Paperinik: are they singing?

Darkwing: i would call it screeching. Also they keep trying to claw at me through the cell door

Paperinik: harpies

Darkwing: what was the other option???

Paperinik: sirens. But they usually have visible scales up close, and you WOULD be that close by now

Donald pressed himself to the doors, trying to listen without actually moving the door; he had the shield if they were waiting for him, but if he set off a *bomb*…

It could just be a door. The Blot could be on the other side, unaware of their presence, unaware of SHUSH closing in on the building. He could walked right back through the doors into the hallway at any second, Donald *hated* how hesitant he was-

If he'd been alone. If it was just him and Uno again, he would have gone through the doors. Would have risked it, his partner wouldn't be in any danger anyway-

If he was alone, he wouldn't have known there were other prisoners. He would have rushed straight in, probably taken down the Blot right at the first cell, and maybe that would have been the end of it. Maybe he would have been caught, and this would all be over, and he'd be clearing out the cells now.

Or maybe the Phantom Blot would live up to the first half of his name and take them all down in a blaze of glory. Donald didn't think he'd be interested in another stint in solitary.

Maybe maybe maybe. He hated maybe, hated constantly being behind the people they were chasing; he wanted to *plan,* not keep getting surprised and blindsided and-

Fuck this. Donald activated the shield.

And carefully pushed the door open.

Rumbling

The room beyond was dim but not completely dark, filled with the gentle sound of lapping waves against concrete.

Donald slid further in. There was nobody here.

There was nothing here at all. Just a small dock, three boats rocking in the water. The faint glimmer of starlight lit the water below a closed grate to the side. The air here was so much fresher he almost choked on it; he hadn't realized how *rotten* everything smelled until he was free of it.

No rooms branched off of this one, there was no sign that anyone had been here either.

Gandra had been so *certain* though…

But she had no reason to trust Donald. Or to help him. She was a FOWL agent, and for all he knew she'd been playing Fenton for a fool this whole time, using his affection for her to keep him from actively hunting her down.

God he'd been an idiot, he needed to get back- but the Blot had such a head start now. SHUSH was still twenty minutes out.

Donald growled, fighting down the urge to fling himself at the nearest wall to start breaking every single *brick,* but he needed to keep himself under control. He was Paperinik, not Donald Duck, and he couldn't afford to lose sight of the mission.

So. Step one. Assess the situation.

The room was empty. There were three boats in the water.

There was no room for a fourth. If the Blot or his assistant had come this way, he hadn't *left* by water.

He started tapping along the walls, moving fast. No hollow sounds, nothing strange, just concrete and mildew. No hidden doors, no signs anyone had been here, nowhere to hide.

Conclusion: the Blot was no longer here, if he had ever been, and Donald needed to double back before he wasted more time.

Paperinik: the blot isnt here, and theres no boats missing

Paperinik: im going to head yor way DW

He wanted, oh he *wanted* to keep hunting, find the Blot and make sure there were no more victims, no more damage, no more *pestilence of a man-*

But there were living victims in the building, and if the Blot had escaped it meant this building was a ticking time bomb of potential death traps and they all needed to get *out.*

He retraced his steps, as best as he could recall from the mad dash this

direction, before he stopped, groaning. Gizmoduck had said he was headed this way too; if he was coming, Donald ought to find *him* first, then find Darkwing, or they risked losing everyone in this strange maze.

Somehow, he doubted it had been built this way intentionally. Something had changed the building over time.

He thought about the door that had vanished before his eyes and shuddered. The best thing to do was ignore it; the building was only a building, nothing more.

Just a building.

He needed to find Gizmoduck so they could start rescuing- oh god, there were *prisoners.* What was he *doing?!*

Step two: Reevaluate.

He wasn't thinking straight, that much was clear; was it just having to face the Blot directly after all this time?

Maybe it was different now because he *did* know how dangerous the Blot could be. He was older, he'd had time to plot and plan and they had no idea what resources FOWL had given him (and the fact that they finally, *finally* had real proof of their collusion wasn't very comforting), he could have developed far worse tools.

Seventeen prisoners. No, more, seventeen *cells.* Donald started moving again.

Paperinik: G where are you

Gizmoduck: what do you mean! Im at the boat dock

What.

Paperinik: is there more than one? I just left there

Gizmoduck: gandra says no, just this one

Donald had a bad feeling.

Paperinik: is gandra still with you

Donald had a *really* bad feeling.

Gizmoduck: … yes?

Okay, good. One less person to keep track of.

Paperinik: okay. Stay PUT. tell SHUSH not to enter the building, just block off all exits and search the nearby area for the Blot. he didn't leave by boat, so either he took another tunnel or he drove out; ask Gandra for help on where to send them

Paperinik: and i think we all need to put on masks

The smell, the *smell,* why hadn't he thought more mundane? Why jump straight to magic, he was so *stupid,* Scrooge was right-

Darkwing: uh, pk? Were already wearing masks

Paperinik: filtration masks

Paperinik: i think were hallucinating

Donald sighed again, and pulled out his own filtration mask. It was meant more for emergencies than for long-term use, primarily a fire or gas attack, but should do here if he was right.

The mold smell went away immediately, which was a relief, even if the air felt even more stifled than before. That… was probably the harpies, now that he was thinking about it. They were *air* elementals. Air elementals trapped underground.

And how had he, or Morgana, or anyone really, not realized that magical *creatures* were just as vulnerable?!

Donald took one moment to breathe. Just the one.

Then he turned around to find Gizmoduck.

The walls were still wet and covered in mildew, and they still seemed to curve and shift in front of him. Donald had cast a healing spell on himself, hoping it would clear anything left in his system, but no go, same as before.

Good, since he could hardly cast one on Gizmo without Gandra noticing. Bad, because that meant-

No, best not to think about it. It was just the mold. Just the mold.

He turned the corner. And there, finally, was Gizmo, with Gandra standing a few feet away. Her pose *screamed* discomfort and annoyance.

Might just be the gas mask she was wearing, who knew.

“Are these really necessary?” She complained immediately upon seeing him, gesturing at her face. Gizmo whirled around, apparently not having noticed Donald approaching, and that alone made him concerned.

“We’ve been smelling mold since we got down here, there are no ventilation shafts that I’ve seen, and there is genuinely mildew on some of the walls. Including in the hallway we’re standing in,” he snapped. “And two of us have mentioned possible hallucinations already. I think the masks are *overdue.”*

She glowered. Gizmo nodded shortly.

“I- my sensors aren’t picking up on anything PK-”

“You didn’t even notice me coming down a one way hallway just now,” Donald continued bluntly. “Masks stay on. Now let’s find Darkwing.”

“It’s just a weird smell,” Gandra grumbled, but started walking.

Donald didn’t bother arguing. He also didn’t remove his mask.

Gandra took the lead, insisting she knew the fastest way to where Darkwing was. Her face was twisted into a grimace at the admission. Fenton agreed enthusiastically, and Donald quietly let it happen, watching their route and trying to mentally map it to the hallways he’d already walked through. For the most part, they did seem to be walking in the right direction, though they did avoid the lab they’d walked through earlier.

Donald could feel the lingering energy rubbing against his senses when they got near it though, and was grateful to avoid the explosion’s epicenter. They’d been lucky it hadn’t done more structural damage, honestly, but the thick concrete walls had held up without a crack.

Unless they were now completely honeycombed with rot, he supposed.

They made another turn, and now Donald could faintly hear the screeching.

Donald raced ahead.

“It’s about time!” Darkwing exclaimed, voice muffled by his purple gas mask. He was pressed close to one of the cell openings, which had no door but was sealed by some kind of forcefield glowing a sickly green. The walls around it were covered in scrapes and burns, and there was similar damage going along the rest of the curving hallway; clearly some of the prisoners had been able to fight.

On the other side of the forcefield, a small pile of feathers trembled. Darkwing murmured something under his breath, clearly trying to be comforting, and stayed pressed to the wall.

In the neighboring cells, screeching harpies pressed themselves against the barriers, all looking straight at the cell Darkwing stood by.

“Gandra, do you know how to open these?” Gizmo asked, turning down to her. Darkwing glanced up at them, frowning.

“Wait, who is-”

“Not important right now!” Gandra cut him off immediately. “And *no,* I have no idea, I was basically a lab grunt- we’re going to have to hack into the system-”

So saying, she stepped forward to the keypad, to an increase of screeching. Darkwing winced; Gizmo looked around wildly.

“What’s- they know we’re helping, right?” He asked the hallway at large.

Donald felt queasy, looking at what was clearly a harpy fledgling curled up in the cell. He couldn’t even see her face.

“ *We’re here to get you all out,”* he called in Greek, hoping- but if they understood him, they didn’t show any signs of it.

Gandra swore, tapping away at the screen. Gizmoduck hovered over her shoulder, trying to see what she was doing, while varying errors sounded from the small device. Donald hissed in annoyance, but this wasn’t his area of expertise, he couldn’t *help*.

He was about to walk down the hall to confirm what else they had imprisoned here, make sure they hadn’t missed something more time sensitive-

There was growling further down the hallway, and the ground rumbled slightly, like something *huge* had just shifted. Dust snowed down from the ceiling, and there was an ominous creaking above them.

Donald looked back at Gandra, who was staring at the ceiling like it might have answers.

“This building has a self destruct built in,” he said tiredly, “doesn’t it.”

She looked back at him. Her face was pale.

“It’s a FOWL base,” she snapped. “Do you really think Heron didn’t equip it with everything?”

She stood rapidly, gloves sparking, face twisted into a stressed scowl.

“I can’t get this open. We don’t have time for me to figure this out, if it will even open without the right key. We should get out *now* , before the rest of the building goes down,” she insisted. “There’s a chain of explosions, they won’t all be at once, it’s designed to trap us all in the middle-”

“What, and leave them behind?” Darkwing demanded, gesturing around. Gandra groaned.

“Look, I get it’s against the whole hero thing, but we’re *all* going to die here if we don’t get out *now!* ”

“Gandra, we can’t just leave them here,” Gizmoduck implored, face going hard. “I can protect us from the debris with the armor-”

“Giz-”

Donald shoved his way forward.

“Wha-”

“You can go if you want,” he growled. “I’m sure SHUSH is getting close by now, they can help you from there.”

So saying, he ripped the keypad from the wall. Or, tried, but it popped off easier than expected, and he stumbled slightly.

“I tried to rewire it, but nothing was moving and I was worried about doing more damage,” Darkwing explained sharply, ignoring the two behind them, who started a whispered argument that Donald tuned out. “PK, she’s just a kid.”

“Blot’s not above much,” he grunted back, tugging at a few wires experimentally. They didn’t give, sturdily pinned in metal brackets, and he didn’t know too much about this, but…

He shifted a bit, so his body blocked the hole in the wall a bit better. Took a breath.

Then he shoved his hand into the opening and muttered “ *Thunder* .”

The reaction was instant. There was a flash, a spark (and burning, burning *burning-),* and the barrier went down in a sputter of sparks.

When in doubt, shorting the system tended to work just fine. Fancy electronic locks and force fields only worked if there was electricity, after all.

The fledgling sniffled, then twisted to look at them. Her face was mottled with baby feathers, some halfway molted, others newly grown in. She let out a trembling, warbling cry, and threw herself at Darkwing.

Donald nearly stepped in to- he didn’t know, catch her? Even baby harpies had sharp talons-

But she was clinging to Darkwing’s shirt and sobbing, his arms were around her and he looked so lost it would have made Donald smile

under other circumstances.

But today, he just nodded in satisfaction and moved to the next cell.

Seventeen cells. Sixteen, now, they just had to get through them.

“How did you get that open?!” Gandra demanded; apparently she had lost the argument with Gizmo, who was looking closely at the smoking hole in the wall, cycling through the armor’s tools thoughtfully. He had a blow torch attachment, good to know.

“Oh, you overloaded the circuits! That works!” He crowed, and darted to the next cell. The harpy inside hissed at him.

“Can we fry the whole hallway at once?” Darkwing asked, looking between them, bouncing the fledgling absently. Her face was still mostly pressed against his chest, but her sobbing was less heart-wrenching now, just tired.

“We’re risking setting off any of the explosives nearby if we do that,” Gandra snapped. She hovered, uncomfortable and wavering, like she was close to bolting.

Donald didn’t reply, tugging the next cover off. Darkwing walked up to the cell, holding the wailing fledgling, and the harpies screeching took a new tone, less angry, more desperate and possibly relieved. The nearest one was slamming frantically against the barrier, like *this* time she could get through it.

And then he had it open and she *could,* gathering the baby to her chest with Darkwing yanked along for the ride, eyes wide. The adult harpy

ignored him entirely, instead cooing into the fledgling's hair.

Another screech, another harpy joining the pile, Darkwing tugging himself free, the ground shook again, while Donald braced himself and opened another cell.

Thirteen cells. His fingers were tingling constantly and his palm was streaked in soot.

If Gandra noticed he was carrying nothing that could have shorted out the circuits, she didn't say it, but she did join Gizmoduck at the next one, moving fast, clearly frantic.

Ten cells. Darkwing was moving in front of Donald, removing covers. The walls shook again, closer now. More groaning, and hairline fractures marred the walls.

The harpies waited in a huddle until the last of their flock was free, clacking and crooning at the baby and each other, before they abruptly started awkwardly walking away, hunched and clearly uncomfortable with the whole walking thing.

Donald watched them for one brief moment, noting they had started in the direction of the water exit. Coincidence, maybe, unless they'd noticed that's where the three of them had approached from. The shudders felt like they'd come from the other direction, so he hoped that entrance wasn't blocked off just yet.

He couldn't think about the Blot escaping through that exit. Couldn't think about the smell of rot and decay that was starting to slip past the mask on his face- it was just mold. The building was infested, that was it.

Infested, and according to Gandra, collapsing.

"Any idea what they were saying?" Gizmo asked, tugging the panel off a cell that- oh lord, apparently it held a naga. The naga hissed, but he seemed more confused than anything else as Gizmo started blasting the wiring.

"Not a clue; they weren't speaking anything I know. I have no idea if any of them understood me," Donald confessed. He was sweating, he realized, and his eye was twitching. Another rumble shook the floor, and the naga shuddered. His hood, patterned like a cobra, flared wide.

"Can you try talking to him?"

"Do you think I know every language on the planet?" Donald retorted. *Greek,* that one he had, at least ancient Greek, but a naga could be from almost anywhere in southern Asia, if they spoke human languages at all.

Nevertheless, he tried to catch the naga's slit eyes. Tried to appear non-threatening, someone there to help, not hurt. But the naga wouldn't look up to meet his eyes; they were pinned on the fire from Gizmo's hand.

Donald had to wonder why they were here, how had the Blot caught them, how were they going to get them *home,* but he had to open the next cell. Gandra glared at him from her own. Hers held another naga, who was clearly staring at the first and ignoring her would-be rescuer entirely. The hissing and growling had ceased after the third harpy cell, hopefully that meant the prisoners had realized this was an escape, not them being taken away for experimentation, but they needed to *hurry*.

Another rumble; there was a distant sound that Donald thought was crumbling concrete. One of the walls took on a long, deep crack, and the ground shuddered again.

The two nagas were freed, and they went for each other immediately, hissing and circling in the middle of the hallway until another shuddering blast forced them apart. Donald stepped between them, growling himself, and gestured sharply towards the exit. Thankfully the two got it and slithered off in the right direction without another glance.

Eight cells.

“Why would they fight right *now?”* Gizmo despaired, rolling still further down the hall.

“That wasn’t fighting,” Donald replied absently, shaking out his arm. The numbness was spreading, and he would have hell to pay healing it later, but he didn’t have any other *choice*- lightning spells had to be directed or they would do exactly what lightning does; find the best and fastest route to the ground, and there was no room to maneuver. Even pointing his hand into the wall risked it hitting the edges of the hole instead.

That, and he didn’t need Gandra Dee aware of his abilities when he was uncertain of *her* loyalties.

“Not…?”

“This isn’t the time for explaining snake people! Please, let’s hurry so we can get out of here!” Gandra interrupted, struggling with the next

keypad. Darkwing moved to help her.

Two more naga, who were faster to start moving away, then a cell full of pixies that Donald handled, mentally praying they were more invested in fleeing the building than they were getting up to mischief. They giggled and chattered at him as he worked, but when he cast the lightning they went unnervingly silent.

He looked up as the forcefield dropped. Numerous pairs of beady dark eyes stared back at him. The only sound was their fluttering wings.

“PK?”

Donald glanced away, and the swarm took the opportunity to blast past him, wings brushing against his cheeks.

Pixie wings were as sharp as an obsidian blade. He didn’t feel a thing, but a single feather fell from his cheek, and when he reached up with his tingling hand, there was a drop of blood.

No time for that. Four cells left, Gizmo’s opened to a swarm of ice sprites instead, the air refreshingly cold and brisk for a moment before they flew off as well.

“How are we going to get all of them out of here?” Darkwing huffed, yanking on a stubborn panel. “We have no idea what the building even looks like right now, we could all be trapped.”

“If we had left when I *suggested* it-” Gandra grumbled, hands plunging into another key panel. Both of their cages held even more sprites, buzzing around their barriers like angry bees.

Donald was surprised the Blot had been able to catch so *many*. Sprites were seasonal, and difficult to catch even at the height of their usual active periods. Hell, how had he caught *four* adult naga? One alone could usually handle a dozen people; they were fast, very clever, and very strong.

Harpies, those he could understand; they were hard to catch in the air, but they had to land eventually. And there had been some in the area lately.

But ice sprites needed the cold, and it was already spring here. They'd either been captured elsewhere, or the Blot had been operating in Duckburg for longer than they had realized.

Dr. Ghast had gotten his power cells somewhere, after all. But what about the ones in Spain? Did he have multiple labs?

Something to ask *later*.

He rounded the corner to the last cell. He *expected* another creature, something unable to communicate directly with them. Maybe a drake or lava lizard, since the walls looked so damaged.

He was not expecting Leopold.

The probable chupacabra snuffled and stared at him with big, watery eyes. He was clutching the tattered, worn, stained remains of Baron von Sheldgoose's cloak.

Phantasm

There was a small, momentary temptation to leave him there. An awful impulse to turn around and go. Pretend he'd never seen him, that nothing had happened.

Then Donald shook off the dark thought and started yanking on the panel.

If Leopold recognized him, and Donald had serious doubts that he would, he made no sign of it. He simply resettled in the cell and clutched the cloak closer, mumbling about his mommy and daddy. Donald forced himself not to listen, he didn't need the distraction, but-

But the cloak pointed to a conclusion he didn't want to consider right this second.

It would have to wait until they got *out.*

His amulet let out a flare of concern; he must be projecting some less-than-calm thoughts, and he didn't have time to respond besides a brief feeling of calm affection sent back. He didn't need either of them to rush here.

Not when he would bet that half the theatre above them was crumbling down.

The circuits sputtered, the cell opened, Donald's hand *burned.*

“Come on, time to head out,” he said to the cowering creature, wary of getting too close. Leopold ignored him.

“PK, that’s the last one! Let’s go before we all get crushed!” Darkwing shouted from behind him. Donald groaned.

“Leo, we need to *go,”* he stressed, praying to himself. For what, he didn’t know. “Now!”

It was probably the command in his voice that did it, but it *did* get Leopold moving. He stood, still hunched on all fours, and Donald scrambled back; he’d forgotten how *large* he was. Even hunched, he loomed, and if not for his forlorn expression Donald would be highly nervous being this close to an old enemy.

Sure, Leopold was probably the least dangerous of Felldrake’s team, so long as he was alone and didn’t have orders. But he was still large, dangerous, and Donald had no idea what he had been up to for the last fifteen years.

No time for that now, though; since his newest rescue was freed and at least moving, Donald slid around him and started jogging down the hall. Leopold’s shuffling followed him to the others.

“What-” Gandra started, staring, while Gizmo flailed in surprise.

“I’m about sixty percent sure he’s a chupacabra,” Donald huffed, not pausing; the ground was a constant rumble, dust was starting to fall from the ceiling again and there were spreading cracks in the walls. A flickering in the corner of his eye that he ignored; it was just dust.

“ *Seriously?!”* Gandra demanded, throwing her hands in the air.

“Did you not know who they were keeping in here?” Gizmo asked, hovering in the middle of the group while keeping his head pointed towards the ceiling. Darkwing fell into step with Donald; the sprites were long gone, the air reeked of rot and decay even through the mask and Donald’s arm was burning now. But he couldn’t risk casting any spells visibly, not when he didn’t know if there were cameras hidden in the walls, not when he was still dubious about Gandra-

Not with Leopold right there.

“I mean, I knew there were… that they had…”

“Hold on,” Darkwing interrupted, twisting to glare. “You *work* here?”

“I-” she started, and her eyes were wide and startled. “I’m- leaving. I’m leaving.”

“Convenient,” Darkwing replied frostily. “Considering your boss left you behind.”

“Hey, that isn’t what happened,” Gizmoduck jumped in.

Leopold sniffled.

The thing about running through a collapsing building was that the building didn’t go all at once. Walls and floors could give way randomly or because someone outside had shifted the rubble, there

were times when nothing moved and then an entire hallway could be nothing but dust in a blink. Especially since they'd been hearing multiple explosions; how many entrances had there been?

It felt like they'd been there for hours already, though Donald knew it couldn't have been more than ten minutes since they'd started opening the cells. Maybe twenty since he'd found Gizmoduck. The tunnels seemed to warp all sense of reality, and he reminded himself harshly that it was the mold damage.

Mold. Damage. It was making them loopy and see things. The halls were probably straight, not this strange curving structure. The flitting and flickering was falling dust, and the whispering was just the shifting and groaning concrete.

The faint trumpet sounds were just creaking metal supports, his mind swapping in a more pleasant sound.

"Look, when I got in I didn't expect to be helping the *Phantom Blot-"*

Apparently that argument was still going on.

"What did you think you were getting into, then?"

"Guys, please, can we talk about this later?" Gizmo pleaded, and Darkwing hissed out a breath.

"You're the one that was all 'we shouldn't break into private property, it's against the law!' and proclaiming that being a sponsored hero is the best way to do it-"

“That is *not* what I said-”

“-and now you’re defending a villain’s lackey? What side are you *on?”*

Gizmo was clearly getting agitated now, and Donald wondered if he was imagining the glare on the back of his head. It didn’t matter, he wasn’t stepping into this; Darkwing *did* have a point after all. Just because Gizmoduck trusted Gandra didn’t mean Darkwing had to, and the situation did look bad if he didn’t know the extraction plan predated this mission.

And Donald could hardly reveal that information without linking Paperinik to Double Duck; it was up to Gizmoduck or Gandra to do so.

But this *was* getting annoying.

“Can we talk about this when we’re not still in enemy territory?” Donald asked the hall at large, still hurrying as fast as he felt safe doing. The walls shook and shuddered, but there didn’t seem to be any new blasts going off. Which made the shaking more concerning, honestly; was the theatre above them crumbling? Was it just residual damage slowly breaking the structure apart?

Leopold trailed behind them, but besides him there were no signs of the other freed prisoners. Donald had to hope they’d all found their own ways out as the building came down; they had had no way to communicate with them to stick around, and realistically no way to protect them all if they *had* been able to. But it also meant there were potentially dozens of magical creatures still trapped in the building or lost in the hallways somewhere, and they’d need an excavation crew to unearth everything in here.

The walls continued to creak and groan, but held steady; either the explosives weren't planned very well, or they weren't intended to completely destroy the halls immediately. Gandra *had* said it was intended to trap anyone inside, a snare slowly closing around their necks.

What had tipped them off to set off the explosion in the first place? Had they been seen breaking in? Surely if that was the case the Blot would have been long gone before Donald could overhear him. Maybe one of them had tripped a security sensor somewhere afterwards? But Gandra hadn't *seen* the Blot, just his assistant, implying that the escape had been ongoing before Donald had reached the lab, and he couldn't remember seeing or hearing anything at that point…

His thoughts were going in unhelpful circles, and there was no point to it; Gandra hadn't known, he assumed, or she would have warned them of the impending explosion faster. For self preservation if nothing else. So they would have to hope that the computer system held information.

The *rage* that the Blot had escaped felt oddly distant, buried underneath everything else around him; the prisoners, the rumbling building, the strangely calm atmosphere as they rushed for an exit… It was off putting, how unbothered by the shaking walls he was.

Like something wanted him calm.

He shook his head. That was silly. There was nothing in this building that would *want* anything. Buildings couldn't want anything.

They continued on. Past the endless hallways and cracking walls and collapsing doorways, metal doors dented and bent in their places. Donald led them the route that Gandra had used, hoping that the harbor opening was accessible; it was the only one he knew for a fact

went outside besides the trapdoor they'd used to get here, which was clear on the other side of the campus. It was the most likely entrance to be blocked anyway, in his opinion; the concrete was holding up well from the destruction, but he wasn't holding out hope for the theatre above them.

A deafening groaning boom echoed down the hall from behind them, followed by the tumbling of rocks and sand. Donald risked a glance back.

There was nothing but dust and debris visible in the hallway, lights flickering on and off at random.

Well. That route wasn't an option now.

They ran.

They *ran,* and it was like that one collapse was all the rest of the place had been waiting for, chunks of ceiling and dirt raining down as they dodged left and right, an avalanche of debris coming down in fits and spurts. Gizmo had his arms spread above the group, some kind of contraption covering them like a metal umbrella, but it left him largely exposed. Behind them, Leopold shuffled along, awkwardly large in the hallway and struggling to run with the tattered cloak in his arms. He still seemed more distraught than scared.

Leopold was a singularly focused individual; there were few things that would have rattled him *this* much-

No time for that, keep running.

Around this corner, then that one, nope, can't go that way, half the hallway crumbled over into itself, turn again, *run-*

The floor began to slope ever-so-slightly downwards.

The doors to the harbor were open, the water lapped and splashed wildly, but the room was intact.

The sprites and pixies were nowhere to be seen, but the naga and harpies were there, screeching and hissing with each shudder of the floor. The boats thrashed against their ropes, the water had soaked the entire floor.

And the opening to the harbor was completely blocked by a massive pile of broken concrete.

They were trapped. They were trapped, underground, with several potentially dangerous magical creatures, the building was still shaking and shuddering, there were no guarantees this room would be stable for long and their route back into the main structure was just as dangerous-

Something flickered in the corner of Donald's eye. He growled.

"Would you *go away,"* he snapped, twisting to glare at the misty white form that grew brighter the moment he acknowledged it. The vague shape of a face grinned.

Phooey.

He turned away again, hoping nobody had noticed his slip, but no luck, everyone was looking at him. Great.

"Any ideas on how to get out?" Gizmo asked. Oh. They were watching him for a plan. "I can lift some of the rubble, but my sensors can't see enough of the pile to know if it's safe or not."

"What about SHUSH?" Darkwing asked, shifting closer to the blocked exit. "They were supposed to be here by now; can we call and have them dig us out?"

"I have no signal," Gizmo replied, turning to watch him. "They know we were inside, but I told them to focus on trying to find the Blot and the other woman since we knew they were close. I don't know if they're still nearby."

No, they probably had focused on trying to find their escaped suspects, Donald suspected.

He checked his phone absently. No signal there either, not surprising, but doubly concerning because he *was* going to have to tell José and Panchito about finding Leopold of all people, and the sooner he could, the sooner they could tell Xandra.

Well. Someone would have to tell Xandra. Donald *would,* but that would require him having a way to reach her.

The ceiling rained a few small rocks down onto his shoulder. He needed to focus.

The dust in front of him settled temporarily into the shape of a head

and shoulders before drifting away again. Donald glared at the spot for a brief moment, before focusing on the issue at hand. There was still water lapping in; clearly there was an opening allowing water flow. But that didn't help them, it wasn't like they could *swim* out.

If they could get the rubble out of the way, they could possibly ride out the wave while the room collapsed behind them. But Gizmo was right, they risked collapsing the ceiling on top of themselves shifting it right now.

If Gizmo could hold up the ceiling while they dug? But that might be too much for the armor to handle, *and* they would be digging by hand. Harpy claws weren't designed for digging, and while naga *were* good at tunneling, they weren't aquatic. Based on how they were cringing away from the splashing waves as it was, he didn't think they would be convinced to help.

And dirt was leagues away from being concrete.

Gizmo and Darkwing were arguing about how to potentially dig their way out, Gandra was floating the idea of going back into the collapsing building and finding another way out, Leopold had curled up on the floor and seemed near tears once again and the flickering was back in Donald's vision.

No, he admitted. No, not flickering.

The ghost huffed as they became more corporeal, arms crossed. Somewhere, somehow, Gladstone was probably feeling smug about being right.

" *We can help,"* they hissed, " *You just have to ask."*

No.

“Do I seriously look that stupid?” He asked, voice mostly drowned out by the continuing chaos.

The ghost huffed again.

“Do you think we wanted them here?” They demanded, waving a hand at their surroundings. “ *Wanted horrific experiments and torture to happen below our feet? We didn’t want them! We don’t want* you! *We just want our home back!”*

A few more figures around them, each flickering vaguely in the dusty room, moved closer and nodded. None of them spoke yet, but Donald didn’t have too much time before they did. Denial in the face of the supernatural could hold it off, but not forever.

He didn’t remove the mask, though. It was at least helping with the dust in the air.

“What are you suggesting?” He asked. Sighed, really.

Ghosts weren’t predictable; they were tied to their places because they had unfinished business, after all; that was their singular focus. Their lives and dreams and emotions slowly fading until they could only recall the one thing that kept them on earth.

But that didn’t mean they couldn’t plot or scheme; it certainly didn’t make them *stupid.* If their true goal was retaining what was left of the

theatre, they could potentially be trusted, but if their goal was a larger *audience*…

Another groan of material, and a scattering of rubble tumbled off the walls ominous.

He'd have to risk it. If the ghosts wanted them to be trapped here, they didn't *have* to do anything. He just had to hope.

" *We will make sure the building does not collapse onto you,"* the ghost promised. " *You just need to tunnel your way out."*

Oh, only that. Great.

"Fine."

A sharp grin, and they disappeared. The ceiling took on a dusty white appearance, and the harpies stared upwards with mild surprise and concern. Nobody looked at Donald.

With that apparently settled, he turned to the harbor entrance. He had no idea how deep the stone was, how powerful the *ghosts* were, but it was something at least… The naga were focused on each other, the heroes were focused on their argument, Gandra was standing close to the doors peering out like she was trying to see if they *could* get out that way.

Nobody was looking at him.

He glanced at Gandra again, frowning. He didn't want to do this.

He didn't want to do this.

But between having one more person aware of his magic and *dying* to keep that secret- Well, one choice was dangerous. And the other was just plain stupid.

He opted to pull the amulet out from under his collar first. It wasn't necessary, but it made him feel a bit better, at least. It pulsed with comfort; he had to force himself not to send his desperation back. He had promised to keep them informed, he *had,* but he couldn't *explain-*

He knew Panchito wouldn't agree with that distinction; that their deal was for him to keep them informed in general.

He would call when he was out of here; they couldn't get here fast enough to help, it was more important that they *get out.* They would understand.

He was stalling. Somehow, the misty ceiling looked judgemental.

"Gandra," he called out, drawing all eyes. "Are there cameras in this room?"

She looked at him. Glared, more, but that was how she'd been looking at him the whole time, so he dismissed it.

"You really think it matters if there's a security camera?! We're going

to die in here if we don't hurry the hell up!" She seethed.

Donald wondered if she just didn't know. Or if this was the first time she had faced a deadly situation she couldn't think her way out of. He's willing to concede, somewhat, that she might just be *scared.*

"I have a plan," he replied as calmly as he could manage (which wasn't bad, in the mask). "But to do it? I need. The Cameras. Off."

The ghosts above them would do better without anyone observing them, for one.

And he could handle *one* person learning of his own talents. But the Blot? FOWL? Anyone who could access their security system? That… no, he couldn't do it. He *couldn't.*

He could still feel the Blot's weapons, ripping and tearing away something he'd never even realized was there; it had *burned.* He hadn't reacted in the moment, adrenaline and rage had been pumping high enough to override everything else, but after-

He didn't want to do it again. Had no idea what would even happen if he did it again; elemental magic being what it was, it couldn't be *taken* from him; it wasn't his in the first place. Donald was a conduit, not a creator. But if the Blot thought for a millisecond he could do magic in any way, he wouldn't rest until he learned exactly why one of his victims could still cast.

Gandra's eyes darted across his face, then around the room, her scowl fading to a more nervous glower. Nevertheless, she shook her head, glancing briefly at her wrists.

“There’s nothing in this room,” she swore. “I had to update the entire security system myself, everything was ancient; nothing is in here except the lights. They didn’t want eyes on the entrances.”

Well then. He was going to have to trust her.

Donald sighed. Tapped the amulet. Glanced at Gandra again, who was watching him like one might watch a snake that they didn’t know for certain was venomous or not.

“You saw nothing,” he warned her.

And he stepped forward and called the ocean to open a path through the rubble.

Interlude: Fenton - In the Eye of a Hurricane

Fenton would have said, earlier, that he had a decent idea of what magic looked like. Felt like, at least to be in the vicinity of it. He'd seen Paperinik cast spells, he'd been around for the Shadow War (though it hadn't truly been more than a short battle), he'd seen more magic than the average person, surely!

It was nothing like this. That had been *nothing* compared to this. A penlight compared to a supernova.

Or perhaps a more apt analogy would be, a single raindrop in a hurricane.

Paperinik stood at the edge of the water, one hand raised, eyes glowing a deep and unending *blue.* They were fathomless, like staring into an endless chasm at the bottom of the ocean. Dark, empty.

Haunting.

The pressure in the room grew, like they were standing at the bottom of the underwater lab without the environmental controls. The temperature *dropped,* the snake people shivering and curling closer together; they stared silently at PK. The harpies shrieked and screamed, but stayed still. Everyone stayed still.

The water swirled, rippled, and with a roar it began to push the rocks and rubble out of the way, opening first a tiny opening, then chipping away at it, twisting and twirling like a cyclone sat on its side, ripping through the layers of rock and dust like it was nothing but an inconvenience.

Fenton's eyes darted to the ceiling, certain that he would see it collapsing, but instead there was- something like fog, hovering at the top of the room. Every crack and hole was covered in it, and nothing, not even dust, was falling.

Magic? He was certain it was, what else could it be.

He then looked for Gandra, had to know that she was alright, she wasn't used to this, not really- and she was standing where PK had been a minute ago, arms wrapped around herself, eyes wide and startled. She didn't look *scared,* exactly, just surprised, but he knew her. He wheeled closer. Let the bulk of the armor offer some meager means of protection.

The room got colder still, and the water thrashed and roared as the opening widened and moved. Fenton couldn't see light, not yet- but there was a hint of something glittering in the water. Through the mask he still wore, the air smelled of salt and brine.

"Get on the boats." Paperinik's voice echoed from the water. Fenton wasn't certain he'd even seen his beak move. His eyes glowed, sightless, and his body seemed to waver and ripple like he was underwater.

He hesitated. The naga and harpies were shifting closer to the tunnel, fearfully? Nervously? Darkwing didn't even pause, he was already helping them onboard and untying the ropes.

Had Fenton even been on a boat before?

PK's face turned to glance at Fenton and Gandra, who was still behind him. His eyebrow quirked upwards, visible even under the mask. He didn't speak again, but Fenton felt somewhat calmed by the casual

action.

Sure, his friend was using magic to open a tunnel of water through what could feasibly be several tons of rubble. Sure, he looked less like a normal person than a- well. Something Fenton couldn't quite name. Something too large to describe as *magical.* But he still was Paperinik, the guy that had decided pranking Mark Beaks in the middle of the day was a good use of his time.

The water continued to roar. Fenton shifted to let Gandra get to the boats first; his armor could operate as a watercraft if needed, and it was heavy; he didn't want to sink them.

Of all of them, he was the safest if the ceiling finally crumbled. Even now his eyes darted back up to it, still covered in the strange flimsy fog. Was PK doing that as well?

Fenton really didn't know much about magic; he asked questions of Donald and PK when they were available, and he had enjoyed asking the scroll a few things before he'd returned it, but it was clear to him that he barely knew anything. A thimble of knowledge in an ocean of ignorance.

He *wanted* to understand it. Wanted to force the unknown into neat definitions and explanations. The other hero at SHUSH, Green Bat, had said that people studied it, which meant it *could* be studied. It could be understood.

Watching the typhoon carefully release them from their prison made him doubt that idea.

Nevertheless, he hovered at the edge of the water, waiting for- well, he'd expected PK to stop at some point, use the tunnel and the boats

and escape before his opening collapsed into itself again.

Instead, Fenton found himself gently shoved into the boat Gandra had sat in, catching himself only barely from falling on top of her, and then they were bobbing in the water, staring into a whirlpool. He turned, to untie the boat, but- PK walked behind them.

Not onto the boat, which was already untied and bobbing gently with the others, packed tight with the other survivors. Straight onto the water itself, which stilled as his boots made contact.

Magic, Fenton reminded himself, this was *magic*.

Paperinik walked forward, hands still raised. The boats bobbed ahead of him, drawn by the current, or maybe he was pushing them with *more* magic. The strange creature PK had found in the last cell glared balefully at him from his own boat, clutching a tattered shred of purple fabric. His eyes were focused on the water and on Paperinik; Fenton didn't like his expression. It seemed oddly… threatening.

Then Fenton felt water dripping on his face and looked forward at the still spinning whirlpool that they were apparently going to go through *while it was still moving* and he forgot to worry about the 'probably a chupacabra' behind him.

It almost felt like a theme park ride, except for how the building groaned and shuddered around them, and a few rocks fell through the water and got caught in the spin, and how there were a dozen creatures in front of him that had been captured from the ends of the earth for experiments- how would they even get them home? The harpies could fly, he knew, and if they were the same ones that had been around Duckburg before they didn't have to go far, but the snakes? This other fellow? Where had they come from? Should he be expecting to transport them somewhere? And what about the smaller

things, the ones that weren't in the room- fairies? Where had they gone?

He let his thoughts wander and ramble, while Gandra's hand sneakily found his and squeezed. Both things were welcome distractions from the fact that his friend was walking on water behind him, controlling the ocean like some kind of god.

It was just his friend. He needed to stop being so silly.

They were fully in the tunnel now. Gandra's hand tightened around his, and behind them the ceiling crumbled like it had been waiting for a sign. The water raged and rose, a wave from the collapse pushing their boat further. PK's hand caught the back of their boat, just to the side of the motor that wasn't running, but instead of pulling himself in he just- stayed there. Dragged along by the boat like he was surfing.

The thought was so comical Fenton had to chuckle, picturing him sliding barefoot along a wave, in a wetsuit and mask.

Would he keep the cape? Fenton thought he would keep the cape.

He giggled again, muffled by the mask that he was still wearing. They all were, actually, even though Gandra had been convinced it was silly- she'd worked there for weeks without issues, why would something come up today?

He hadn't known how to respond. He had wanted to say he trusted Paperinik's judgement (and hallucinations were certainly concerning!), that if his fellow hero recommended something for their safety then Fenton was fine with following his advice. But he'd gotten stuck on the other part of that statement.

She'd said weeks. How many weeks had she been there? Since they'd agreed to get her out of FOWL? Before? Why hadn't she tried to tell him something? She might not have access to their virtual lab, perhaps, but she was *in town,* surely there was some way to pass along a message? She knew his name, she knew where he lived. She knew plenty of his coworkers- there had to have been a method to send something, right?

They would have to talk about it. He would admit he was scared to do it. He loved Gandra, they just *got* each other on a level Fenton hadn't experienced before. But he couldn't deny she was a criminal. Their first meeting had been because she was working for Mark Beaks! He wasn't naive, he realized that her moving from Beaks to FOWL wasn't good- he trusted her when she had told him what she *wanted* and how it had gone wrong . But jumping from one kind of villainy to another… Would she be able to turn a new leaf? Or would she find yet another criminal enterprise to join? *This* one would be different, until it wasn't and she was asked to do something immoral all over again.

He had to have faith in her. Not blind faith, of course, he couldn't just pretend nothing was wrong.

But he could hold her hand right now and worry about the rest later.

There was light at the end of the tunnel. It had been… longer than expected, if he was being honest, they'd clearly been pretty far underground. But it couldn't be morning already, could it?

No, it wasn't. The light was from a number of search lights mounted to a fleet of larger boats bobbing in the harbor around them. Fenton tensed, but before he could get too nervous he noticed the SHUSH logo and a few familiar faces in the boats.

There was a wet thud behind him as PK climbed back into the boat. He was tucking something into his shirt, eyes losing their glow, and the tunnel behind them sputtering to a stop. As soon as it did, the piles of loose rocks and rubble collapsed, but instead of a large wave the water merely rippled and settled back into nothing. Like it had never happened.

PK caught his eye and grinned, his facemask shed at some point. Then he silently tapped a finger to his beak. Fenton nodded. It wasn't like he'd planned to reveal that information anyway, even to SHUSH.

It struck him, now, that using magic in a Blot lab had been a risky endeavor. He winced, feeling guilty that he hadn't realized until now the risk Paperinik had taken by doing that. If there had been a single working camera, if SHUSH agents had seen him and weren't cautious about keeping it secret…

As soon as the boats were fully clear, the harpies took off, one of them carrying the little one on her back. The agents yelled in surprise, lights swinging up to follow their flight, and Fenton took to the air himself.

"Hold on, they're friendly! Don't shoot!" He shouted above the waves and noise, and the floodlights caught the gleam of his armor like a beacon.

Darkwing did always say his armor was too flashy for night work. But in this moment it worked in his favor, as the weapons and lights settled down.

"Gizmoduck? We got your message, can you and your, um…" a younger agent started, then paused, the lights clearly pointed at the nagas sitting in Darkwing's boat. Darkwing waved back with a grin.

“We found a few prisoners in the cells and had to plan a quick rescue,” he explained in a sharp voice, smiling a darkly unpleasant smile. He looked unimpressed, and somehow amused by it, like he’d won a bet he’d wanted to lose.

The agent blinked at them, but Fenton had to give him credit, he recovered fast.

“Alright, let’s get everyone off of the FOWL boats, don’t want to risk them being booby trapped too; do you guys need help?”

There was a mad scramble then, as the other agents around took the hint and started tossing ropes to get everyone up onto the (much more stable) SHUSH yachts. The naga offered some resistance before Darkwing hopped up first, before trailing after him with many hands dragging and pushing their long tails.

The chupacabra creature simply jumped up and landed in the middle of the deck, where he curled up and proceeded to continue ignoring them all once again, sniffling occasionally and mumbling to himself.

Gizmo helped Gandra up, letting her slide partially behind his bulky armor. Fenton didn’t think she was a known face, but better safe than sorry until they could reach Agent 330 or the Director.

Double Duck was busy climbing up onto the boat himself, after all.

PK shook himself off once his feet hit the floor, not even struggling to stand despite the continuous rolling waves. Fenton, trying to keep the armor balanced, felt a bit jealous. He was tapping away at his phone, not even looking up at the rest of them for the moment, frowning. He

was tense, gritting his teeth.

“I don’t suppose you caught him?” Fenton asked the nearest agent, a younger cat who was watching them closely. She shook her head ruefully. Not a huge surprise.

“We mobilized as soon as we got the message, but thus far nobody has reported finding anyone. You said you weren’t sure which direction he went, right? We lost your signal for a while,” she reported sharply, confident. PK glanced up at her, putting the phone away. It was already buzzing as he did so.

“We heard his voice, but never made visual contact,” PK answered, and several eyes snapped to him.

“You’re completely certain it was him?” The cat agent asked. PK considered, face drooping. He looked like he was ready to collapse in exhaustion to Fenton’s eyes.

“I’m familiar with his voice. But I didn’t *see* him, and Gandra didn’t see him after.”

A few people started muttering at that; not loudly, not noticeably, but a bit. The naga hissed. The nearby agents winced and slid further away, lights flashing to and fro, and a few of the other boats started their engines and began moving away from the convoy.

“His assistant was here, I saw her shortly before the explosions started,” Gandra called out, stepping forward. “He might have slipped out with her without passing me. But they both were living in the labs.”

“When was the last time you saw him there, ma’am?” The agent asked immediately. “And what direction did his assistant go?”

Gandra started answering, explaining the last time she’d seen the Blot (yesterday), the assistant’s last location (“I saw her heading to the harbor exit, but another one branches off of it to the north. It’s a longer walk, comes out to a storage closet in the subway tunnel on 9th Street”), what she looked like (white duck, long red hair). The last answer caught several agents’ attention, and abruptly they were barking orders and making calls, like that line had been a kick to the hornets nest.

Fenton glanced around while the agents scattered; Paperinik had hopped to another boat entirely, speaking to the agents there about the naga and what resources they might need to help place them. The agents he was speaking to looked slightly starstruck.

The chupacabra was still curled in the center of the deck, everyone around giving him a large berth. He seemed completely oblivious to everything around him. Everything except the fabric in his claws.

Could he even understand them? Fenton thought PK had spoken to him briefly before they’d started running, but the hallway had been fairly chaotic and he couldn’t be certain. He’d tried talking to the naga and the harpies though, and none of *them* had spoken either, so he really wasn’t certain.

Still, nobody was speaking to him. Or trying to. PK was still with Darkwing, who was speaking rapidly to one of the other agents now, Gandra was still talking about the missing assistant.

So Fenton carefully hopped to the correct barge. Rolled to face the creature. He didn’t look up.

“Er, hello! Are you okay?” Fenton asked carefully. He had no idea what he was doing, honestly, should he have tried Spanish?

The creature mumbled to himself. It sounded like he said something about… daddy?

“Do you understand me?” Fenton tried. He got no response.

He considered patting him on the shoulder. Even started to reach out, slowly.

“Don’t.”

PK was standing there, abruptly, a hand on his wrist. He tugged Fenton a few steps back.

“Just leave him be, I already called in backup,” he continued in a murmur, low enough that his voice was almost lost under the sound of the waves. Fenton turned to squint at him, confused.

Wait, he’d had his phone out when they’d gotten to the boats, hadn’t he.

But who had he called…? Well, likely texted, but regardless-

“You know him?” Fenton asked instead, under his breath, with a minute gesture at the creature. PK glanced down, then back at Fenton

with a grimace. He'd looked sympathetic of the other creatures they'd freed, but this one individual seemed to have put him right on the very edge.

"Yeah," he confirmed, and said nothing else.

An agent approached them. A chicken, and Fenton blinked in surprise, then again in concern, when he realized it was Agent 330.

Double Duck's partner.

Double Duck, who was also Paperinik.

Paperinik, who was standing right next to Fenton.

Why yes he was panicking a bit, why do you ask?!

"Uh, Paperinik? Nice to meet you, I'm Agent 330. Can I- can we ask you a few questions? About the Phantom Blot," 330 asked eagerly. "I know the Director wanted to get you into the office, but since you're here and we need to debrief anyway, I thought we could kill two birds with one stone."

Fenton winced at the metaphor. PK snorted a laugh.

"I can answer a few questions, sure," he replied easily, unworried.

Fenton let out a noise of some kind, because they both glanced at him.

PK grinned and winked, hidden behind the brim of his hat, while 330 looked confused.

"Ah- nothing, don't worry about it. But, uh, you might want to let the Director know we have Gandra with us," Fenton stuttered out, scratching the back of his neck. God why did anyone trust him with secrets, he was so *bad* at this part!

But really, *how* was Paperinik so calm?! His identity was a thin piece of fabric away from being revealed!

330 glanced over at the deck Gandra was on, arms wrapped around herself. She was still talking, and the agent she was speaking to looked nothing but professional, but more agents had swarmed the boat and were milling around. He didn't think they were doing anything except exchanging information as they bobbed in the water.

Fenton should get back to her.

He turned back to their conversation.

330 waited until their eyes met and nodded.

"I'll make sure that she knows," 330 swore, then turned back to PK.

"So, what can you tell us about the Blot-"

There was a shout from another boat.

They all turned.

Welp. That was certainly a glowing portal. With a seven foot tall tern standing there, an enormous atlas in one hand, a recurve bow in the other. Behind her, two shorter shapes stood, almost completely obscured by the glow.

She snapped the atlas into some kind of harness on her back, and drew the bow.

“Leopold!”

From behind him, PK let out a soft, weary groan.

“Agents, heroes,” he muttered, more to himself than to anyone else, “meet Xandra, the goddess of adventure.”

Do You Come By Free Will?

When he'd said they should hurry, he hadn't expected them to get here *this* fast. Primarily because they would have to find Xandra first, and it wasn't like she had a cell phone!

… did she?

"Goddess…?" He heard someone ask. "Is he serious?"

"Maybe its more of a title for a powerful witch or something," someone replied. "Better question is why *adventure* of all things."

Right, need to focus. Regardless of how they reached her, there she was, in all her literal glory. Panchito and José stood behind her, but he could only just make out their shapes in the glow.

Were they in disguise? *Should* they be? José was already a known entity if he used the Green Bat persona, but Xandra was a new issue altogether…

Not that he really got a choice on how they handled it. He'd only been able to send a message saying he'd found Leopold in a Blot lab, not wanting to risk anyone seeing his phone screen. He hadn't been able to add any useful details, like him being out as Paperinik tonight, or them being surrounded by SHUSH agents, or there being other creatures here-

Thankfully, José was always quick to pick up on a cover story, leaping out between Xandra's taut bow and the milling agents, who were already reaching for their weapons.

“Ah, apologies for the interruption! We got a call from a mutual acquaintance and came to assist with what we can. I am Green Bat, I believe I have met some of you?” José asked pleasantly, and now Donald could see he was in fact in a mask. Alright, he could work with that.

He stepped forward, waving a causal hand. It shuddered when he raised it; apparently that was the damaged one. Great, he’d almost forgotten.

“Don’t suppose you want to find the ice sprites that we let loose?” He called out, drawing all eyes. “Cause I think they’re going to do some damage to the local weather patterns if they don’t head north soon.”

It was only partially true. But the agents seemed to relax, aided by Xandra’s arrow drooping slightly, while she looked around in confusion. Panchito, still hard to see, tugged her down by the elbow and started whispering frantically in her ear. Her face was drawn, stressed and grim.

José caught his eye first and grinned, letting his eyes clearly rove up and down. Donald winked back; he really was weak to him in that suit.

Wait, shit, he was Paperinik right now, *Double Duck* knew Green Bat. He had to remember that bit. Granted, there was no proof that they hadn’t met before, he just needed to avoid mentioning the SHUSH meeting.

And pray that Xandra was aware of the whole story, because he wasn’t confident his mask was enough to hide his identity. Since he was wearing his Caballero amulet and all.

Which he had been *using,* so he also had to hope that Leopold either hadn't noticed or didn't care. He hadn't had a *choice,* though, if he hadn't started responding to the Cabs increasing worry and panic they would have, well-

Panicked. And Donald couldn't handle that *and* tunneling them out of the building. His head was still rippling.

"We're more concerned with our winged friend here," José replied carefully, hopping forward so he could peer at Leopold over the water. Leopold hadn't moved, even at Xandra's shout.

"You, er, know… him?" An older agent asked, veering away from Xandra and her still-open portal to stand by Donald. Donald glanced at him, noting he had been present at the seminar, and nodded.

"We're old friends, in a way," he answered brightly, "unless you're referring to Leopold over there. Fraid that's a more complicated answer."

"He has a name?"

"Oh, yes, Leopold the Terrible. Used to be in cahoots with a dangerous warlock," José answered, walking closer. "Of course, we thought he had died *with* him, so this is a surprise."

At that, Leopold let out a wail and started openly crying. Xandra sighed, putting her bow and arrow away entirely and jumping forward to land directly in front of him. Panchito, still clinging to her back, waved at Donald and José as they passed.

Oh. Oh *no*.

Panchito was *also* wearing a mask, a black one that covered the top of his head and face above the beak. And a loose fitted black laced shirt and pants. He looked like he was trying to be Zorro.

It shouldn't work for him. It really, really shouldn't.

José caught his eye and smirked.

It *really* worked.

Phooey.

"Leopold?" Xandra asked, not sparing a glance at anyone else. "Where's Felldrake?"

"Daddy's dead!" Leopold sobbed, wings snapping around to curl around his face and body. "Dead dead dead, and mommy too!"

Felldrake and his descendant/accomplice Baron von Sheldgoose. Donald sighed.

"How did they die?" Xandra asked, frowning. Which was a good question; Leopold had vanished with the pair during their final battle; if Felldrake and Sheldgoose were dead, why wasn't Leopold? Surely they hadn't been alive and well this whole time?

Unless the Blot had caught them *years* ago? But he hadn't been active that long-

"Lady eated them," Leopold whispered. "Put them in a pot with beets."

Pot with beets…? *Eaten?*

Donald took a slow breath. Then another. Leopold might be wrong, he may have misunderstood something, there was no guarantee that-

"Said I wouldn't taste good and go away," Leopold continued tearfully. "Chased me away. Wanted to go back, but house was gone gone gone."

Well that was harder to misinterpret. Felldrake wouldn't have let him leave if he was at all capable of calling him back.

"Who was the lady, Leo?" Xandra asked, voice sliding lower, sympathetic. Leopold was never a direct threat, he only attacked on orders. And he was especially pathetic here, crying into what was clearly Sheldgoose's old cloak, worn and tattered after who-knew how many years.

Leopold didn't answer. Donald took the chance to look around.

As expected, most of the SHUSH agents were watching the conversation; a goddess arriving out of nowhere and talking to a chupacabra *was* a bit shocking, he supposed. Some were still talking

through comms and phones to coordinate the larger search for the Blot.

Donald didn't think they wouldn't be successful. The Phantom Blot had received his namesake for a reason; the Blot of course referring to his rotting, inky scars, but the *phantom* part was equally accurate. If he'd gotten out of the lab, he was already gone.

Donald clenched his fists, focusing on not screaming. He was *furious*, burning bubbling rage just under the thin calm he was trying to project. Raging, burning hatred that he had slipped right out of their *fingers.* He'd heard him, he'd been so *close-*

Maybe he could have caught him. Maybe they could be *done* with this already, no more labs and cells to find-

He was shaking.

This *was* a FOWL base. It had been set to explode and trap them all inside. Darkwing pulling him back might be the only reason they'd even *found* the prisoners, let alone rescued them. Had Donald been alone, he *would* have leapt forward the second he heard the Blot's voice, and, well, they'd apparently been prepared to collapse the entire structure just to trap any survivors.

And he had the small, festering theory that the Blot had never been there at all. He'd only *heard* him.

He didn't think he'd been thinking straight the entire time they'd been inside the building. Haunted buildings weren't great for the focus on a good day, and the Blot's strange cursed magical scars left a rotting miasma everywhere he went. It grated and scraped on his mind, left him anxious and shaky.

He couldn't quite remember how the first fight with the Phantom Blot had felt. He'd been scared, certainly. Angry.

Horrified. Then something far beyond that, when he'd found the labs. The notes. The recordings.

The bodies. Then the survivors.

And then the Blot. His rotting form, his arrogant voice. His dismissive reaction to the destruction he'd left in his wake and the blood on his hands.

The ripping, burning pain from the first hit of the gun, and the repeating shrieking stabs of each successive shot. The Blot had been convinced that the only people who cared about the magical community were guaranteed to be members of it. Funny how that worked; Donald only started practicing magic after their fight.

This time he'd only felt anger and desperation to finish this before he had to add to the list of casualties. And the nauseating magic permeating every crack of the building.

Blinking, he turned to look back at the building. They'd drifted a bit further away now, so he could see the top of the theatre. Which had apparently survived the explosion, though it looked like it was teetering to the left.

Should he make sure the building was restored? The ghosts hadn't asked him to do it, but they wanted their home back. If the building collapsed because of the explosion, they'd be just as homeless as they would be if the Blot had continued using their resting place as a

torture chamber.

Something to worry about later. Panchito had slid away from Xandra to hop up to José's side. He grinned at Donald over José's head, looking him over blatantly.

Well. Donald could hardly deny he wasn't doing the same thing.

But he should probably tone it down a bit, Darkwing *did* know his identity.

"Can you three handle our friend? One of the agents had something to ask me," he asked, and hopped away with a wave when they nodded and turned back to Leopold.

God he loved them so damn much.

Donald made his way back to 330, rubbing his eyes. He was *tired.* He needed to sleep, to recharge, and he had to fly out for his mission in two days.

No, tomorrow. It was after midnight now.

"What questions did you have, Agent 330?"

330 jumped, twisting to look at him. Kid was pretty jumpy.

Come to think of it, what *was* he doing here? The Blot taskforce didn't

officially include him because of their personal mission- had he tagged along? It was late, they might have just called all hands on deck.

“Right,” he said, eyes drifting briefly to the other Cabs and Leopold, Xandra now kneeling down to look at him. “First, um, should we be worried?”

“About them?” Donald asked with a chuckle. “Nah, they’re good people. Leopold there is just a unique case, figured I should contact the experts. He’s pretty harmless alone.”

Lady ate him. Something about beets. That felt familiar.

“Right,” 330 said again, before he visibly gathered himself. “So, the Phantom Blot. What can you tell us? You caught him the first time. I’ve read your report, but your insight on him personally would be really useful right now.”

“He’s an arrogant son of a bitch that thinks of everyone around him as disposable fodder for his mission,” Donald replied immediately. “He didn’t even have assistants the first time around, none that knew what he was up to. We never found any proof, but the amount of work he got done in the time he had? He had some kind of help that we never found. My suspicion was always that he disposed of them when he didn’t need them anymore.”

“Only a suspicion? Nobody was ever found?”

“He had a giant incinerator on site,” Donald replied quietly, looking away for a moment. “There were a lot of people we never found.”

330 took a sharp breath, and fell silent.

"He's convinced nobody except magic users will care about what he does or who he hurts," Donald continued after a moment. "So if you try to catch him? He's going to shoot you with one of his magic drain guns, guaranteed. Be prepared for that."

"We don't- I don't think we have any, er, magician agents," 330 answered awkwardly. Donald gave him a grim sort of smile.

"Didn't Green Bat tell you? Everyone has the potential for magic," he said. "Just because you're not actively using it doesn't mean it can't be taken away."

330 stared. Frowned. A slowly dawning realization crossed his face.

"... what should we be prepared for?" He asked. He didn't say the obvious.

Good.

"It feels like something just got ripped out of you," Donald answered carefully. "Burning like fire the whole way out. If you're not a magic user, the shock should be minimal, but it'll knock you on your ass for sure. You'll want to ask someone more involved for what to do for any long term treatment, I wasn't part of that, but if any of your agents get hit let me know and I'll make some calls."

"Thank you. That's appreciated," 330 said. "We're going to be sending some people into the labs once we're able to stabilize the rubble, so we'll probably have more questions at that point. But for right now, is

there anything we should be looking out for? Did he usually keep notes anywhere specific, or anything like that?"

Donald considered for a moment.

"Well, first thing, the theatre is haunted. And they really don't want anyone around. But if SHUSH can help keep the building from collapsing they might be willing to help," he said plainly. Might as well get that out of the way.

And while 330 was blinking in confusion, Donald barrelled on.

"Honestly if we can find his personal effects, that would be helpful for potential tracking. But all of the notes we found the first time were in a journal he carried with him at all times. So unless he got stuck in the lab collapse, we're probably not going to find it."

"A journal?" Someone else asked, walking up. "That could be useful! There's no journal in any of the physical evidence from the first case, what happened to it?"

Donald let out a slow sigh. He'd been hoping to avoid this one.

"I burned it once the trial was over," he stated bluntly. "Along with his inventions, prototypes, original power cells, and everything else I could find. Anything I didn't destroy I gave to Gizmoduck already."

"You *what?!"* The same agent, someone Donald didn't recognize, shrieked in surprise. "That could have been used to find him! Or study how to counter his weapons! Or-!"

“Or build a working replica of his weapons?” Donald asked sweetly, louder than her building rant. “Which, you know, was *only* useful if you wanted to hurt magic users or magical species? Groups that nobody cared about?

“And I don’t know if you’ve read his file, but he was sentenced to life, no parole.” He continued without letting her reply. “Maximum security. Might have been stupid of me, but I didn’t think we would *have* to find him again. Take it up with the prison that *let him go.”*

“He didn’t just walk out the door, he was smuggled out,” she argued. 330, standing just to the side, twitched like he wanted to speak, but didn’t know how to step in.

“He might as well have waltzed right under the guards noses for all the good they were!” Donald retorted, face flushing. “And now here he is doing the same damned things, and how long exactly was he out before anyone realized the local terrorist wasn’t where he was supposed to be? Last I checked it wasn’t because of anything SHUSH was doing, it was because Darkwing Duck was doing his fucking job!”

“And if we had the same information *you* seem to, we could have caught him tonight! Instead of bringing the building down on all that potential evidence! We could be *done* with hunting the Blot tonight, if you three vigilantes hadn’t stuck your beaks into it!”

“Alright, hold on!” Xandra stepped in, and Donald instinctively stepped back and to the left, opposite her sword hand in case they- well. She wasn’t going to need her sword. But old habits die hard.

“According to Leopold,” Xandra said coldly, looking down at the shorter agent (and they were all shorter than her), “the man in the black cloak wasn’t here today. He hasn’t been by the cells in over a week, the red haired lady was doing cleanup. They were planning to

blow up the lab either way. The only thing these *heroes* did was make sure their victims survived."

"And Leopold is, what? The winged thing?" The agent sneered, but even Donald could see she was cowed. Hard not to be with a seven-foot tall goddess staring down at them. Even Donald felt chagrined, and not only was he not the target of her ire, but he'd also seen her in her pajamas eating cereal straight from the box before.

"He's a chupacabra, of sorts. And he's more than intelligent enough to tell us what happened," Xandra answered, arms crossed. Donald glanced back at where Leo had been lying, and saw he was sitting up now, Panchito gently patting his paws. José he couldn't see.

"Can we interview him?" 330 jumped back in, stepping forward. He'd lost the uncertain look and was back to business. "Any information he has would be useful, and it didn't seem like the others understood us."

"Oh, the naga? They don't usually understand human languages," Xandra said cheerfully, her stern demeanor melting away. "I can see if we can find a translator for them, if you like. But Leo's being pretty cooperative right now, so I can introduce you!"

"Thank you!"

Donald caught the eye of the agent he'd been arguing with as the two stepped away. She was still scowling.

If he was Double Duck right now, he'd probably say something to clear the air. He needed working relationships with his fellow SHUSH agents, and objectively she wasn't entirely wrong. He would be frustrated if he found out piles of potentially useful evidence had gone through the incinerator too.

Hell, he *was* frustrated! Some of it could have potentially been useful! But he'd been so focused on making sure this *never happened again,* he'd inadvertently created a scenario where they had to start from scratch when it did.

He had no way to know if his choice of burying the Blot's research had done any good. If anyone else would have stepped into his shoes. Donald had been young, injured, mourning. And he'd desperately wanted to do *something* to fix it.

"Just because you happened to do a good thing," the agent grumbled, "doesn't mean it wasn't a terrible idea. You could have made the situation worse."

"Sounds like it's a good thing we moved when we did; did *you* guys have plans to go in?" Donald asked. No answer. He hadn't expected one; he already knew damn well they didn't have anything concrete.

He wondered if this agent was supposed to lead a mission there.

"How did *you* know to come here?" She asked, arms crossing.

"I got a tip from a friend that there was some 'weird magic' going on around here," he said carefully, like he was defending his source instead of trying to recall how he'd phrased it for Darkwing and Gizmo. "Wasn't sure initially if it was the Blot; that is, until we got inside, which was when Gizmoduck gave you guys a call."

"If you didn't think it was the Blot, what did you think it was?" She demanded, keeping her voice low and vicious.

“Honestly, I thought the building was just haunted,” he replied. “Which, it is, most theatres are, but turned out not to be the issue. But I had an enemy that used that building as a base years ago. I was making sure *they* weren’t making a comeback. ”

“Haunted-” she started, but someone else jumped in.

“What old enemy?” Another agent jumped in; FG9 if he remembered correctly. Nickname was Gates, but PK wouldn’t know that, so he dismissed it.

“Aliens called the Evronians. Their technology was emotion-based, sucked them right out of a person to power their weapons, then kept the victim as cannon fodder. Cool Flames, they called them,” he explained quietly. “They were starting an invasion when I was still a new vigilante, didn’t really have anyone to call so it was just me and a few allies. We pushed it back, but the news called the whole thing a hoax afterwards. You can probably still find the articles. Angus Fangus had a field day with it.”

“There was an alien invasion in Duckburg? A *second* one?!” FG9 exclaimed and wow, look at that, there were a lot of agents who apparently weren’t busy, because they were gathering around now with interest.

“An *attempted* one,” he corrected, just a bit smug. “We blew up their mother ship; they haven’t come back since.”

“We?”

Donald winced, letting out a rough breath. His fingers tingled with

pain, and he clenched his fist in response.

“Had a few allies at the time. Most of them went back to their homes when we chased off the fleet,” he said slowly. “Hard to keep contact across the galaxy, so I couldn’t say where they are, now.”

“How’d you meet them?” The first agent asked, curious despite herself.

Well that was a loaded question.

“I- ran into someone locally who was watching for them,” he answered slowly, trying *not* to picture Everett’s face as he spoke. “Or, his son technically, but- I’d fought one of the Evronians already, he'd seen it on a traffic camera or something so he knew who I was, and we ended up allying. Can’t say much more, though, sorry- identity issues.”

A ripple of disappointment, not quite loud enough to qualify as a groan, and the crowd dispersed. Again. He glanced back at FG9, who had lingered.

“I’m guessing nobody has found him,” he said. Asking implied he didn’t already know the answer. FG9 shook his head.

“We’ve got agents pouring over the streets, but by the time we got to the exit tunnel he was long gone. Our team was able to get far enough along to find the rubble from the explosions, so we know we found the right entrance; our team is getting the traffic cam footage now.”

“Can we put out a message to ground air traffic?” Donald asked.

“We have, but it’s late, and if they had a small plane or helicopter they might have already taken off. Or they could have had a boat waiting in the harbor… there’s a lot of ways in and out of Duckburg.”

Donald was fairly certain there were no boats holding the Blot out at sea right now. He’d just been in the water. He *knew* the ocean, knew the Blot’s rotten, slimy magic. He was all but certain the Blot was nowhere near the ocean, or he would have noticed.

But he didn’t argue the point; he didn’t know for *sure,* after all. And the Blot *could* have gotten on one since then, anyway. Donald could sit there and search the ocean for a sign, wait until the Blot got close enough to water for him to sense, but there was no guarantee that he would ever do so. Or that Donald would have enough energy to stay on guard long enough to actually catch him.

With that dark thought in the back of his mind, he turned back to the remaining creatures. Panchito was standing near the naga, holding Xandra’s atlas and pointing to varying locations she could open a portal to. An agent hovered over his shoulder.

José was with Xandra and Leopold, watching 330 jot down notes as Leo spoke. Donald debated circling closer, but opted to keep his distance. He could get the news later, and he needed a moment.

Just a moment, feeling for the waves beneath them to try and catch his breath.

… beets… why did that sound familiar…

… he smacked himself in the forehead. Baba Yaga. Felldrake had gone

to *Baba Yaga*.

At least they finally knew what happened.

Sleepless Nights Once Again

Donald wasn't able to slip away until the sun had properly risen. Xandra, José and Panchito took the naga and Leopold with them, confirming they would get the former home safe and bring Leopold somewhere safe. Donald was hoping that *didn't* mean their home, where their baby was, but he couldn't ask.

He'd wanted to talk to Xandra privately for a moment, if he could, but he couldn't find a reason to approach the trio before they were heading off. He'd have to ask about it later.

His arm was fairly burning now, he really needed to find a moment to heal it. The patchy light of the search lights and flashlights was enough to hide the injury, but not enough to hide him healing it, so he would have to wait.

Darkwing begged off at dawn, after giving his report of the events to one of the agents. Gizmo and Gandra were shuffled off to SHUSH headquarters by 330, who was possibly the only person who realized the significance of her presence at the site. Gizmo hesitated, glancing back at Donald before they hopped onto one of the departing boats, but Donald waved him off.

Then it was just him. He'd openly said he'd planned the investigation, so naturally they wanted to know what, exactly, his reasoning was for going in.

He stuck with his story: an old friend told him about a strange magic around the building (technically true, Gladstone *had* initially only told him that he couldn't get close to the theatre), and because any 'weird magic' could have meant Evronians, ghosts or something worse in the past, or potentially a Blot problem *now,* he'd opted to call in some allies to take a peek.

No, he had no idea SHUSH was planning a mission, why would he know that? If he had he would have passed along his intel instead.

His tongue burned a bit at that, but technically SHUSH *did* have all the same information he had, minus the Evronian bit. If they'd had a more solid mission plan in the works he *might* have held off, sure.

Donald stopped talking about his reasoning after that point, focusing on what they'd seen in the lab instead. The last thing he needed was to dig himself even *deeper,* if anyone started suspecting his connected identities.

He was able to give them a rough map of where they'd been and what they'd seen, with the caveat that there had been something strange about their perceptions.

"Let me guess, ghosts?" The agent that he'd been arguing with, Agent LL5 apparently, snarked. Donald shrugged.

"I'm pretty sure we were smelling mildew or mold the entire time we were inside, so I thought it was that at first," he said blandly, watching her scowl twitch at his tone. "Hence the gas masks. Ghosts can cause hallucinations, but you have to really believe they're there for them to be very effective."

Hence him telling the other heroes it was mold, and *these* agents it could be either. Gizmo and Darkwing were predisposed to believe Donald about anything magical or supernatural, so he hadn't said it; these agents were naturally skeptical, so he was banking on them *not* believing him at all.

And convincing them to continue wearing the masks would be wise; he wasn't completely certain that mildew *wasn't* part of the problem. Best to cover their bases.

Beyond that, there wasn't much to say that Gizmoduck and Darkwing hadn't already said, so finally he could go home.

Well. To the Tower to change and grab a bite of leftovers, then home, already cursing that he wouldn't be getting any sleep. He couldn't exactly skip work today without it appearing suspicious, and he wanted to see what SHUSH was up to on the inside.

His Heal spell woke him up a touch, and took off the worst of the pain in his arm, but his palm continued to sting when he flexed his fingers. He'd try again later; too many too fast wasn't as effective as spacing them out, let the body do some of the work in between when you can. He drove primarily with his left hand, grimacing whenever he needed to grip with both.

When he got to the beach Gladstone was standing on the deck of the houseboat, chatting with Panchito. Who was apparently awake, despite… everything. They both turned to watch as Donald slowly walked up to join them.

"Early morning?" Gladstone asked. Donald shrugged, accepting the now-routine coffee.

"Late night," he grunted, and Panchito gave him a sympathetic wince. He looked as tired as Donald felt, honestly.

"Another mugging?" Glad asked casually, sipping at his own drink. Donald felt a shiver roll down his spine. He glanced at his cousin over the edge of the cup, masking his hesitation with a loud slurp.

Gladstone wasn't looking at either of them. He was very intentionally not looking at either of them.

"... I plead the Fifth," Donald finally grumbled, taking another drink. Gladstone looked up at that, snorting.

"Course you do," he whined, shaking his head. "Can't tell me *anything,* even though I'm your favorite cousin. No, gotta leave me in the dark, and Panchito here won't tell me anything juicy *either."*

Donald raised an eyebrow at that, glancing back at Panchito, who shrugged.

"I got a call from an old friend and had to help with a relocation of sorts," he explained casually, like Donald didn't know. "A few magical creatures needed some help getting home."

Probably more detail than Donald would have given, but at this point he was beyond caring. He was half tempted to reveal all his secrets right now, just to relieve some of the pressure. This little venture had made it very clear this would *not* be a stable situation long term.

The issue was… well. Donald would admit he didn't trust SHUSH. Even Ravenson, who he considered a good Director, certainly better than Hooter had been, he didn't trust with everything. He'd been burned by them before, and things could change on a dime. The last thing he wanted to do was give them ammo if they ever decided he needed to be reigned in.

Briefly, he thought about Bugs, and the Warner kids, and scowled. No, he wouldn't be trusting SHUSH with anything more than he had to.

“Magical creatures?” He asked, playing oblivious, and Panchito nodded enthusiastically.

“Ah, yes! A few naga, which are very tricky to speak to, they mostly only hiss, did you know? And some ice sprites, plus someone you might remember from New Quackmore!”

Donald looked up, lowering his cup so he could direct genuine confusion at him. Was he really going to…?

“Do you remember Leopold?” Panchito asked. Donald blinked at him, Gladstone entirely forgotten.

“Yes…?” He started, before he shook off his confusion. Panchito clearly had a plan, *Donald* had to trust him. “I thought he died?”

“Apparently not! Though he is in need of some rest and relaxation!” Panchito declared, before leaning in, as though to whisper in Donald’s ear, but speaking loud enough that Gladstone would clearly be able to hear.

“Our old friend decided to take him back home with her,” Panchito revealed in a low voice. “She is hoping she can help him; they have known each other for some time.”

“I don’t think being mortal enemies really counts, Pancho,” Donald protested, but yeah, that did sound like Xandra. Good or bad, Leopold was now the last living being from her past, excluding the other gods. And it had been clear that Xandra wasn’t close to any of them.

“Mortal enemies?” Gladstone asked, and oh yeah, he was still there. Donald nodded, then wobbled his hand back and forth.

“Sort of. He worked *for* her mortal enemy, so it kinda counts,” Donald explained, then turned back to Panchito with wide eyes. “ *Please* tell me it’s only Leopold.”

“Ah, yes. He has said that the others… did not make it,” Panchito confirmed. Which Donald already knew, but hearing it again was… comforting. Grim, but comforting. He did feel bad for Sheldgoose, he supposed, but not terribly. He may have been a patsy, but a willing one all the same.

He sighed. Took another sip of coffee. He would need a lot to get through the day. And then he had the mission tomorrow-

Phooey. He still hadn’t told anyone.

“Hey, Gladstone? Got a favor to ask you,” he said, chewing on his beak. Glad immediately eyed him, suspicious.

“You never ask me for favors,” he retorted. “You *hate* asking people for favors.”

“Yup.”

“Yet here you are.”

“Here I am.”

“Asking me for something.”

“See, this is why I never ask you for things,” Donald told him, gesturing with his coffee. “You make a huge deal of it.”

“But you never-! Alright, what’s the favor?”

“I have a work thing tomorrow. That I have to fly out of town for,” Donald explained shortly. Gladstone stared at him.

“A work thing,” he said slowly.. “That you have to leave for. *Right* after nearly dying and having a new egg to start preparing for and some all night thing you can’t talk about-”

Gladstone stopped talking. Frowning. He looked frustrated.

“What is this work thing?” He asked, crossing his arms. “I’m not getting involved for no good reason.”

Great.

“Someone we were investigating died, and I have to help go through their effects to confirm if the death is related to that investigation,” he finally sighed. Fine. It was fine. He could trust Gladstone, couldn’t he?

Actually, he *could.* Despite everything, Glad had kept his secrets for weeks now. Sure, he didn’t know much, but he still hadn’t done

anything with what he did know. He hadn't even asked Donald anything about it before now. In other words, he had done everything he could to be trustworthy.

Donald felt oddly warm, and he didn't think it was the coffee.

"Who?" Gladstone asked, less severe, not even surprised by Donald's phrasing. Like he'd already guessed that Donald would be investigating something; what *had* he concluded? Donald almost wanted to ask, but plausible deniability took precedence. For now, anyway.

"I… probably shouldn't-" he started, but then huffed. It really didn't matter. "Santiago Acosta."

Gladstone went still. Very, very still.

"Ah." He said. Just that. His gaze went slightly distant. "Right, I remember him."

Donald nodded, though what he was agreeing to he couldn't really say, and caught Panchito's eye. Panchito looked confused, which was fair, Donald hadn't explained this part, but understanding.

He also looked concerned, but that was probably because Donald was wobbling a bit where he stood; he was going to need more coffee to make it through the day. Maybe he could take off from work early and claim he was preparing for the mission…?

"He died?" Glad asked, drawing Donald's attention back. Gladstone stared back at him, eyes narrowed slightly.

“I had nothing to do with it!” Donald protested immediately, and the tension cracked like an egg. Gladstone laughed, a full belly laugh he rarely let loose, and Donald found himself grinning back.

“Alright, alright, so what, you want me to cover for you? Cause uh, don’t think we look that much alike anymore,” Gladstone finally answered, shaking his head. Donald huffed a laugh of his own.

“We never did,” he retorted, shaking his head. “No, I wanted to make a bet.”

“A… bet?”

“Yup. Bet you twenty dollars you can’t find a way to tell everyone I’ve got a work thing without them all freaking out.”

Gladstone stared at him. Panchito was giggling quietly into his mug.

“You’re betting *me* that I *can’t* do something,” Gladstone clarified, a delighted expression slowly crossing his face. “You’re betting that I can’t charm everyone into some kind of distraction.”

“Yup. It’s completely impossible,” Donald said blandly. “And it would be so inconvenient if I have to go get cash to pay you. I’ll have to go to an ATM, and those things never work right for me, so it’ll be a whole *thing.* Truly *unlucky* if I had to do that. But you won’t be able to do it, so I’m safe.”

“Huh,” Gladstone replied, nodding thoughtfully. “Well, you never

know, maybe I'll get *lucky."*

He reached out a hand. Donald took it and they shook, one, twice. Donald took a sip of his coffee. Gladstone fixed his hair.

Glad's phone chimed.

"Well, would you look at that!" He crowed, pulling it out to peer at the notification with a smug grin. "I think I have just the thing for this little bet!"

"We'll see," Donald replied, equally smug. "We will see."

Much as he wanted to talk with Panchito, *needed* to explain he'd wanted to call them for help earlier but *couldn't,* he swore- Donald didn't have time for more than a brief kiss before he had to change and head back out the door. He was getting too old for these all-nighters, he lamented to himself as he reached the parking lot.

Inside, SHUSH was buzzing with energy, agents running back and forth from offices to the bullpen, voices shouting updates every which way. Certainly a change from the usual calm on the main floors; chaos was usually reserved for the labs after a fire.

For appearances sake, Donald peered around until he spotted someone to pull aside (thankfully *not* LL5), who he was fairly certain had been on the boats earlier.

"What's going on?" He asked, glancing around while raising one

eyebrow. “Please tell me we don’t have another bug problem.”

The other agent huffed a shaky laugh, glancing around like they were only just seeing the chaos.

“No, nothing like that! There was a Phantom Blot sighting!”

“Where? When was it?” Donald demanded immediately.

“Last night! The local heroes apparently raided that haunted theatre downtown and found his *lab!* Then he was spotted again boarding a helicopter leaving St. Canard!”

That was news to him.

“Do we have eyes on it now?” He asked, trying not to grab the other bird by the lapels. Calm, he needed to stay calm.

“No, we lost it over the harbor, but we’ve got people scrambled over the entire state looking now-” the agent answered absently, and Donald let him go back to what he’d been running to do.

So he’d flown out from St. Canard? Had they had a car waiting to take them there? And why St. Canard? It wasn’t any easier to fly out from there than Duckburg. It was notorious for being worse, actually, their part of the harbor was known for its strong winds and never-ending fog.

He’d have to ask Darkwing, but that would have to wait. First, to his

office, where he found 330 pouring over a pile of old files and case notes.

"I met Paperinik!" He announced as soon as he saw Donald. "Not for too long, but I got to talk to him, I- oh. Do you know what happened last night?"

"I caught the gist of it on my way in," Donald answered, tossing his bag into his seat. "What's this about Paperinik?"

"I got to speak to him briefly after we got them out of the collapsed lab- oh shoot, I forgot to find out how they did that magic thing to clear the rubble," 330 answered, distracted, flipping through his notes.

Phooey, Donald had managed to forget about that.

"Might have been one of the creatures with them?" He suggested. "I don't remember any of the local heroes listing magic as a skill set."

"Maybe? I don't know if they *would* list it," 330 replied, paging through something else. "Green Bat *did* show up, but that was afterwards, so I don't think it was him… We've got a crew digging through the rubble now, we're hoping to find an intact computer somewhere. Gandra Dee said the explosions were meant to trap people, so they were focused on the entrances. We might be able to salvage the tech from the main lab."

That would be a stroke of luck. Donald had his doubts they would be getting one.

If he was being honest with himself, he was still surprised there had

actually been a lab there at all. He'd been expecting- storage, probably, power cells waiting to be distributed. Certainly not a fully-functional lab space complete with victims and the Blot himself.

Well. If he was being *entirely* honest, he was *furious.* The Bot had been *here,* under their beaks, and if he'd gone in the day that Gladstone had told him about it they could have caught him! There may have been fewer victims, even! But he'd *waited,* let SHUSH take the lead, and for what? For them to sit on their heels as usual, talk about procedures and plans and not bother *doing* anything until the last minute.

Then they got on his case when he *did* decide to go in! The Blot, and everyone inside the lab, would have been long gone by the time they got around to taking a look around, if they even bothered at all. Donald knew a mission had been being reviewed, but that didn't mean approved, or planned. Once again they only just found a FOWL location because of sheer *luck.*

If he was kinder he might call it good investigative skill, finding so many FOWL locations. He wasn't feeling kind right now.

"And I talked to a- not sure *what* he was, I think they said a chupacabra? His name was Leopold," 330 continued absently. "He wasn't super interested in talking, besides saying something about his parents."

Felldrake and Sheldgoose, Donald mentally corrected. Daddy and Mommy, as Leopold had always called them.

"Was he able to say how the Blot caught him?"

"Wasn't much up for anything, but he did say he was caught in a net flying somewhere in Europe. Guess geography isn't his strong suit,

cause he wasn't sure where besides 'a forest.' The tall lady, Xandra, said she'd try to ask him more questions when she could."

Donald nodded. Leo had been singularly attached to Felldrake for centuries, no doubt the loss was hard for him. But besides him, the only other potential information would have to come from either the harpies, who had fled immediately, or the naga, and the language barrier would make that one particularly tricky. Leo remain their best bet.

"Who else was there?"

"Well, Gandra Dee was apparently stationed there; we had to get her moved to a secure site before anyone realized she was with us. And, uh, *willingly*. Cause she wasn't exactly fighting to get away, you know?"

Donald nodded. Considered how to approach his next point.

"Gandra Dee was a confirmed FOWL agent," Donald finally observed quietly, "So that seems to clinch the connection."

"Yeah, I guess it does," 330 agreed, before he sat back and blinked in surprise. "I didn't even think about that. Should I write a full report for Director Ravenson?"

"When you have time," Donald replied, "but under the circumstances I think she probably knows already. Focus on the time sensitive issues. First whatever is happening right now with the theatre, and the search for the helicopter, but we also have the Costa Rica mission tomorrow."

330 swore, rubbed his eyes, and shifted the pile of notes around to find a notebook. Donald left him to feverishly write, turning to his own computer.

He was unsurprised to find a mission reassignment in his inbox; after all, they had fairly conclusive evidence of FOWL being allied with the Phantom Blot. And he assumed Gandra was offering up all the details she knew, so even if there were doubts, she should be clinching them.

What he *didn't* expect was to be added to the ongoing *FOWL* taskforce. Not the Phantom Blot one.

Donald forced himself to breathe, air hissing through his nostrils. FOWL was objectively the bigger threat. The Blot was technically *part* of FOWL, for all he knew they were collapsing the task forces together.

But it certainly *felt* like they were abandoning chasing him entirely. And of course it was now, now when Donald didn't have the time to do it on his own, when he had to be cautious about revealing his multiple identities or else be accused of leaking information.

He forced himself to read the other briefings. Summary notes from his, Darkwing, and Gizmoduck's interviews, mentions of where the helicopter had last been seen and where they were now searching, staff listing for who was digging in the rubble right now, and… nothing on Gandra Dee. All mentions of her had been removed from the summaries, and there was nothing listed as far as interrogations.

She was being treated as a high-level security interest, then. A lot of agents had been on site with her, but few would have known who she was, Donald supposed. They hadn't exactly tried to hide her identity. Maybe they should have.

Problems for another time. Right now he had to go through the new information, then prepare for Costa Rica.

And pray that Gladstone was *not* able to win their bet. Yup. Can't lose to his cousin, he really didn't want to have to pay him out.

Suspicions

Donald made his way to Ravenson's office, already tense. He was just going to ask about the reassignment and Gandra's security level. He would *not* let himself get into a debate over SHUSH versus vigilante timeframes. If he started in on it, there was no guarantee he would be able to keep his identities separate.

Just confirming the new mission parameters and if he could talk about Gandra to his new teammates. That was it.

He knocked on the door.

"Ah, Double Duck," Ravenson said, face neutral. "I thought you'd be by sooner or later. Sit down."

"Just wanted to confirm a few things about the mission change," Donald replied, sweeping the room. Ravenson watched him do so with a placid expression. She seemed *too* calm, but he couldn't tell if she was masking anything besides stress at the evening's events. He took a seat.

"Those being?"

"Whether Gandra Dee's presence is information I can share; I didn't see anything about her in any of the early reports, so I'm assuming that's being kept dark?" Donald asked. Ravenson nodded, her expression slipping into a grim one.

"Supposedly she was behind the bugs, but until I know for a fact there were no other leaks, that information is not to be put on record. No

emails, no notes. Purely word of mouth, and nobody but you, myself, and Agent 330 should speak of it for the moment."

"What about the vigilantes? Gizmoduck's been working with us on that and on her extraction," Donald pointed out. "Pointless as that was, he's aware of her presence."

"She's being hosted off-site, and at the moment he's with her. We'll discuss how in the loop he'll be when we've been able to get her full report," Ravenson answered. She sighed. "I'm not going to lie, her being in Duckburg concerns me. Gizmoduck advised she was out of contact, and thus far we have no reason to distrust him, but the coincidence isn't doing well for either of them, in my book."

She gave him an inquiring look at that.

"Nor did it escape me that your friend Paperinik seemed to have confidential information about that location that to my knowledge was not shared with any of the vigilantes," Ravenson continued, face smoothing into blankness again. "Do you know how he acquired it?"

Donald took a breath.

Well.

At least she was direct.

"I didn't speak to him about it," Donald answered calmly. "He's a friend, but I'm not giving away SHUSH intel just for that."

Think think think-

“Then how do you explain this?” She demanded. “We have a sighting of a possible suspect and not a week later someone you’ve confirmed you have contact with is going in with intel even *we* didn’t have about the site!”

“He was there when Gladstone mentioned he couldn’t get near the building,” Donald invented on the fly, voice flat and irritated as he could force it to be. “We were having coffee. And that’s *all* that he was there for. Anything PK knew beyond that, he got elsewhere.”

Ravenson huffed.

“The lucky cousin, right? He said he couldn’t get near the building, and you both assumed it meant something strange was going on,” she sneered, face contorted far angrier than he’d ever seen her. Her cheeks wrinkled oddly, like there were scars beneath her feathers.

“Gladstone’s luck is magical, in a way,” Donald explained, face equally contorted. “If it’s keeping him from doing something, it’s because it would be unlucky if he did it. I realize it sounds absurd, but yes. I did assume there was something strange about an old haunted theatre that Gladstone couldn’t get within a city block of.”

He didn’t like spelling out his cousin’s unusual curse to anyone; people liked to think Gladstone had some control over it, and the idea of it being used against them often kept them from trying to take advantage. The last thing Donald wanted to do was put anyone on his trail just for his *own* convenience.

“And the alien base nonsense?”

“That also happened. You can read Angus Fangus’ report about it, it was fairly accurate until he ended it by saying it was all staged.”

Ravenson scowled.

“Next time,” she said snippily, “I want you to mention if anyone *else* potentially has that kind of information. Trusted friend or not.”

“Understood.” Donald snapped back. “Back on subject, the FOWL mission?”

“You’re joining the taskforce, but your class of trainees is getting close to ready, so it’ll be on the backburner; 330 will be assigned as a solo agent at that point, if you have no concerns,” Ravenson said, settling back into her seat and smoothing her expression like nothing had happened. “Finish up in Costa Rica, then we have the Tibet base that they want you and 330 at, and your friend Green Bat has… requested that you be present for his next seminar in Switzerland.”

She glanced back at him at that. Donald shrugged.

“I haven’t spoken to him about that,” he replied. “But magic is based on belief. He might just need someone in the room that doesn’t doubt magic is real, to make sure he can do an effective demonstration.”

“Interesting. How many skeptics would it take to negate his abilities?” She asked slowly, looking curious. Donald waggled a hand back and forth.

“It would really depend. People who don’t believe are different from *skeptics.* Most people are slightly skeptical but haven’t put a lot of thought into it; that’s easy to overcome. If they’re all confident that magic isn’t real? That’s harder to handle. Green Bat is talented enough that he would probably be fine regardless, but there are no guarantees.”

“And you’re still unwilling to join his demonstration?” She asked.

“I’m a field agent, or a teacher, not a mage,” Donald protested with a casual grin that he didn’t really feel. “I’d prefer not to add that to my SHUSH resume, if you get my meaning.”

Ravenson nodded, then glanced down at a note on her desk.

“You have clearance to visit Gandra Dee, but under the circumstances you might want to wait until you get back from Costa Rica,” she said with a sympathetic smile. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t sleep well on planes. Feel free to leave early today and get some rest.”

Donald nodded, and prayed she couldn’t see the bags under his eyes.

Donald lingered long enough to find out who to ask for updates on the helicopter search, then went back to his office to find 330.

“Go home, kid, you’ll want some sleep,” Donald ordered, shoving 330’s laptop bag into his hands.

“But- it’s only a few hour difference, and we’ve still got so much to go

over-”

“Go *home.* Bring your notes to review on the flight if you want, but you’re going to regret being sleep deprived going into a field mission,” Donald told him, crossing his arms. 330 huffed.

“We’re just touching base with local law enforcement,” he muttered. “How well rested will I need to be for that?”

Donald raised a brow at that. It wasn’t a particularly exciting mission, sure, but 330 sounded openly resentful.

“Come again?”

330 winced.

“Sorry si- sorry, Double Duck. Just doesn’t seem like looking through Acosta’s home and autopsy report is going to help us find anything useful,” 330 confessed. Donald considered him for a moment.

“No, it may not,” he confirmed. “But remember, it wasn’t just FOWL at that auction. We may find leads on all of them. We may not. Either way, he *is* dead. And that’s an odd coincidence under the circumstances.”

330 paused, considering.

“Do you think this is the Blot- or FOWL, I guess, cleaning hose? Like with the power cells?” He asked, looking marginally more interested.

“I don’t know,” Donald said, “But I am seeing a trend of everyone the Blot has indirectly worked with turning up dead.”

Huh. They should probably push more on Dr. Ghast; he was the only accomplice so far that had lived. He hadn’t said a word to anyone since his arrest, though.

“Except for Mme Rouge,” 330 pointed out. Donald nodded, conceding the point.

“So, is that what we should be looking for when we get there? Signs of FOWL’s involvement in his death?” 330 asked. Donald shook his head.

“No. We’re looking for evidence, we’re not forming conclusions ahead of time. But personally, I think we’re going to find Alvarez didn’t get far. One way or another.”

330 wrapped up and left shortly afterwards. Donald checked over the reports still coming in to see if there was anything new, but besides status reports indicating no signs of the missing copter, there was nothing coming in.

On a whim, he also checked the weather. As he’d suspected, there was a cold front coming in.

Ice sprites. Not terribly powerful weather-wise when there was just one, but a whole swarm of them could cause blizzards in the Sahara. Hopefully they’d fly north after causing a little havoc. They deserved a bit of fun, after- Well.

After. Not all of them got an after, with the Blot.

He did worry about the pixies, though. That many in one place was unusual, outside of deep forests and the occasional pocket dimension. Had they stuck around, Donald would have asked them questions, though getting anything useful from them would probably have been a waste of time. As it was, they really were depending on Leopold's explanation of his own capture to get an idea of how the Blot was choosing victims this time.

He was also worried about the pixies in *general;* they were mischievous at the best of times, and could be downright dangerous in the right mood. Donald had to hope they weren't angry, or if they were, that they were angry at the right person. Or Louie Inc might be starting a new magical pest control company.

One last glance at his email, and then he was out the door. Chaos still reigned in the hallways and conference areas, but it was dying down to controlled chaos, so nothing new seemed to have happened.

He wasn't surprised. They hadn't been ready to pursue the Blot; if he'd had the slightest inkling that the Blot was *in* that building he would have locked down the entire *city,* consequences be damned, until they could drag him out by his stupid cloak. Instead he'd been blindsided by hearing him in the halls (and had he even been there? Nobody, *not a single soul,* had seen him until the helicopter escape in *St. Canard)* , and SHUSH hadn't been able to secure the exits in time.

He drove home. His hand still tingled even after another Heal spell, but it was better.

He wanted to go to the cabana, see if Xandra was still there to chat with, get the full rundown of what happened with Leopold and the naga, maybe relax for a bit-

But he still needed to let everyone know he would be out of town. Time to see if Gladstone would be winning their bet or not.

So he went straight to the Manor, tossing his suit jacket and tie into his passenger seat instead of changing. The Manor was quiet; so quiet it was concerning, enough that he was almost afraid. Usually the kids weren't really that subtle unless Webby was leading them into another game of Death Darts or some other stealth game. And Della was hardly any better, most of the time.

There was nobody home. The doors weren't locked but the Manor was deserted. He hadn't checked every single room, but he could *tell,* this family was not this quiet.

Nothing to panic over, nothing wrong- the yard was huge, after all, and he was home early. They could be out in the woods. They could have gone out for the afternoon; he didn't know what Gladstone was planning after all. He just needed to text someone to ask.

But what if they weren't in one group, and they weren't aware that the others were gone, and he freaked everyone out by him panicking over nothing? Downer Donnie, paranoid Uncle Donald who couldn't even take them to a theme park without worrying about their safety-

Breathe.

First, he went back to the kitchen to see if there was a note. Nothing.

Then he called for Duckworth, but got nothing; he was never sure if the ghost stayed in the Manor consistently or if he traveled elsewhere. Nothing to panic over yet.

He went outside, peering around the pool, clean and empty once again. No signs of anyone, he couldn't hear anything, where *was* everyone-

Donald glanced at the path down the hill. Where there was a lovely private beach, on this, a nice warm day.

He might be a bit silly; good thing nobody had been around.

He almost walked down the hill before he smacked himself and went back to his car. No need for everyone to know he'd been worried.

Back around the driveway, down the hill and yup, there was some of the family already, gathered around Gladstone's place; apparently while Donald had been gone he'd gotten some porch furniture and was now lounging in the shade in a dark green lounger, while Bentina sat nearby reading a book.

They both sat up in surprise when Donald pulled in, Gladstone waving with a grin, Bentina more contemplative.

"You're back early," she observed quietly, closing her book in her lap with a finger to hold her place.

"I've got that work trip and the flight leaves early tomorrow," Donald said easily, hopping up to sit on the rail of the porch. It didn't even creak, which was nice. Gladstone had clearly designed it to match Grandma's old porch, but where that one always leaned to the left, this one was pristine and straight.

“Ah, right, that. Oh, hey, guess who scored a pile of three day passes to that giant waterpark by Fresno?” Gladstone asked, face twisting into a smug grin. “Kids are over the moon, we’re gonna rent out a giant suite, eat nothing but junk food, the whole bit.”

“Gladstone was kind enough to invite me along,” Bentina continued, looking between them with contemplation. “I imagine that it was for help keeping the children in line, but I will confess the idea of floating down a lazy river for a few days is appealing.”

“Hey, it can be both!” Glad insisted, grinning. Donald smiled back.

“Sounds like fun,” he replied cheerfully. “I’m going to be stuck in meeting rooms the whole time, best I can tell. Clyde’s itinerary is… extensive.”

“Clyde?” Bentina asked, glancing back at him.

“Ah, guy from the Houston office, don’t know if you’ve met him? Real stuck up dude, but he’s in charge of this whole thing, so,” Donald said with a shrug. He could tell her he meant C4 later, but by the look in her eye she’d put it together.

“So, I think someone owes me a win,” Gladstone said leadingly, holding out a hand. Donald shook his head.

“Not until the news breaks; the bet was that they wouldn’t freak out,” Donald retorted. “Gonna need proof before I admit defeat.”

Bentina was watching them again, eyes narrowed. Donald smiled blandly back. Gladstone snorted a laugh, sipping at his lemonade.

“Sure, sure, you’re just delaying the inevitable,” he drawled.

“You’ve got me curious, now,” Bentina admitted, sipping her own drink.

“You’ll see. Where is everyone, anyway? Guessing Scrooge and LP are still at the office…?”

“Yes, though Mr. McDuck did plan to be back fairly early, so I imagine we’ll see them soon,” Bentina said with a nod. “As to the children, I believe Della wanted to practice trap setting, so they’re all in the woods somewhere.”

A pause, a short meaningful glance, and then she continued.

“I believe, since the children are otherwise occupied, she has convinced your uncle to go on their own trip, though I didn’t hear where they were planning. Possibly something too dangerous to attempt with children in tow.”

Donald couldn’t think of *anything* that would be too dangerous for Della and Scrooge to hold off on for the kids’ sake, personally, but couldn’t entirely discount it. Maybe Della just missed getting time with just Scrooge and was taking advantage of the opportunity. She seemed desperate to have the kids with her whenever possible; the idea of leaving them behind for a solo adventure probably grated.

But if they were busy *already*…

“So it’ll be an empty house,” Donald observed, instead of acknowledging the rest of it. “Maybe I’ll throw a party in the Manor while Scrooge isn’t around, if I'm back in time.”

“That would be ill-advised,” Bentina warned, face dropping to a serious glower. Donald stared back, unperturbed, before he laughed.

“God, imagine his *face* though,” Donald pointed out, and Bentina’s face broke into a small smile.

“I imagine he would wonder why you’re rebelling so late in life,” she replied, and here Gladstone choked on a laugh.

“Oh he rebelled *plenty*. Hey, remember when you ran off for like a month without even leaving a note, and just told him you were at a party when you got back?” He asked, grinning wildly, and even Bentina looked intrigued.

Donald forced himself to laugh. He’d been in space blowing up the Evronian mothership at the time, and hadn’t had even the faintest idea how to excuse his disappearance.

So he… hadn’t.

“I left him a note!” He insisted instead, throwing up his hands comically.

“For a *month?* What kind of party was *that?!”*

Phooey.

Donald turned to see the kids, plus Della, emerging from the woods nearby. They were all scuffed up and filthy; everyone but Louie looked pleased. Louie just looked tired, and he flopped to the sand with a grumble as soon as he reached the shade. The others trailed behind him, falling with a touch more grace, and Huey started handing around water bottles from his bag.

Dewey, the one who had yelled, continued on until he was right in front of Donald, staring at him with an intensity usually reserved for new adventures.

“I’ll tell you when you’re older,” Donald answered with a cheeky grin, bracing himself for the howl of displeasure.

“Oh *come on!”*

“Aw come on Don, even I don’t know that story!” Della groaned, tossing herself into a chair and combing through her feathers for loose twigs. “It’s been years, what could it hurt?”

Donald shrugged, miming zipping his lips. Dewey pouted, crashing his head into Donald’s waist as he leaned all his weight against him. Donald patted his shoulder.

“A month-long party sounds so *cool,”* Dewey whined into Donald’s feathers. Donald shrugged.

“It got old after a while.” Was all he said to that. “So, I hear something about a water park?”

That got everyone awake again, enthusiastically telling him about the park and the nearby zoo and the mega hotel suite Gladstone had booked, each talking over each other and getting louder by the second. Della looked a bit put out by their excitement, inserting a comment here and there that the haunted ride wasn't a *real* haunted house, and the roller coasters weren't *that* tall.

"At least it's better than that place Glomgold built on the pier," Donald replied to the last point; Dewey frequently complained he hadn't been the one on the news for being traumatized on said rides, they were well-known death traps and Donald was waiting for the time Glomgold succeeded in killing someone.

Della shrugged.

"What's life without a little danger?"

"Safer," Donald replied immediately, and he was met with a number of eyerolls. That was fine.

"So Glad mentioned you've got some kind of work trip this week?" Della asked when the fervor died down. Donald nodded, letting out a theatrical groan.

"They can't just *mail* this stuff to us, I have to go *there,"* he complained. "And just when I got back!"

Huey peered at him from under the brim of his hat.

“You’re okay to travel, though, right? And it won’t be stressful?”

“Or dangerous?” Louie added, sitting up a bit to look at him as well.

“I’m fine to travel, don’t worry, and I’m expecting boring, nothing stressful besides the fact that I have to be there. But my boss did say that their next class is coming soon, so I won’t be traveling as much after that.”

“So this is the last one for a while? Cause it would be *awful* if you missed the egg hatching!” Webby exclaimed, popping up at his side. Donald started to nod, before frowning.

“This is the only one on the schedule, but I think they wanted me at one- wait, two other things coming up,” he said slowly, trying to recall. “Helping teach a different class in Switzerland, but that might be optional, and something in Tibet.”

“What’s in Tibet?” Dewey asked immediately. Donald snorted.

“More confidential paperwork that can’t be mailed, has to be couriered around. Easier to just send the people to it instead,” he explained shortly.

“Is everything you do confidential?” Huey asked, frowning. “Cause you’ve said that a few times now.”

“Er… yeah, most of it,” Donald confessed. “That’s why I’m not sure I can take you in to see my office. Not that it’s that interesting.” He added as an afterthought.

“What about your coworkers? Can we meet them?” Louie asked, slumping back to the ground. He was still watching Donald from the corner of his eye.

“We’ll see,” Donald chuckled, thinking about introducing them to C4 and imagining the man’s face.

Della turned the subject to their trap work, enthusing about everyone’s varying contributions, each kid glowing at the praise.

Eventually, Della insisted their ‘break’ was over, and they should head back out ‘before you guys leave for your little trip with Gladstone!’ Huey stopped to refill their water, and then they were off, each waving goodbye.

Once they were out of sight, and earshot, Donald sighed, groaned, grumbled, and pulled a wrinkled twenty out of his wallet to slap into Gladstone’s outstretched hand.

In Which A Decision is Made

Since everyone apparently had early flights for the next morning, Della and Scrooge included, they all opted for an early, quiet dinner and off to sleep. Scrooge didn't do more than blink when Donald mentioned his work trip, frowning. He opened his mouth like he wanted to speak, but instead shrugged, wished him well, and moved on. It was… jarring, in comparison to the last few days.

Apparently Gladstone had managed to tell everyone in advance and, as planned, kept them distracted and happy enough from the news that nobody was balking at Donald being gone.

Or maybe everyone else was already over Donald nearly dying and it was just Donald that was struggling.

He made a note to set up a new magic lesson for Lena, and dance for both Webby and Dewey; they'd gotten their entire schedule messed up in the last few days. Plus Dewey wanted to learn swordplay, Louie wanted to get better with his scimitar, and both Webby and Huey should be getting *something*…

But that would have to wait until he got home. Right now he was going to go to the cabana and get some details about what was going on.

And spend some time with his partners and their egg.

"Donal'! You're here!" Panchito crowed, as Donald emerged from the cabana onto their porch. He found Panchito covered in potting soil, his varying plants in the process of being weeded and trimmed. Their egg sat in a nest a few feet away in a patch of sunlight; Donald trailed his fingers over the shell and smiled at the soft tap back.

That was something that would never get old.

Pancho brushed some of the dirt off before giving Donald a properly enthusiastic greeting, grinning all the while.

“I thought you would be getting some sleep,” Panchito said when he’d set Donald back on the ground. Donald wavered a bit on his feet, rubbing his eyes.

“I mean, I wouldn’t mind some rest,” he mumbled, glancing at the hammock strung up on the far side of the porch. “But I also wanted to ask what happened with Xandra after you left. Didn’t really get a chance to touch base.”

“Ah! Well, in truth there is not much to tell,” Panchito admitted, unsubtly steering Donald to the hammock with a smile. “After we returned here briefly, Xandra opened a portal to somewhere in India, I did not see where exactly, and our naga friends slipped away. They seem fine, apparently they were caught while traveling above ground, so they are intending to tell their people to stick belowground.”

“Did they say anything about what happened while in the lab?” Donald asked, letting himself be pushed, gently, to lay down in the hammock. Panchito hummed, moving to hand Donald the egg, which he happily curled around with a sigh.

“No, nothing. Apparently they had not been there terribly long; they said that the other cells were occupied when they arrived. Everyone they saw was wearing one of those silly helmets, the egg ones? And they understood very little spoken English, so could not tell us much.”

Of course. Why would it be that easy?

“Oh! One did say that the red haired woman, the one you recognized? She wore her helmet most of the time, and it has a large crack in it. Does this help you?”

Donald shook his head, already feeling drowsy. Warm sun, warm egg, Panchito right there… he fought to keep his eyes open for a bit longer.

“Ah, well,” Panchito waved the idea off. “Xandra is trying to speak more to Leopold, but he is very distraught about Felldrake and Sheldgoose. She took him to the World Tree to stay for a time, the other gods have offered to keep him company and make sure he does not… wander off.”

Donald hummed again.

“Xandra is planning to help find the others that you freed; harpies, pixies, and some weather sprites, yes?” Panchito clarified, and Donald nodded absently.

“We will find them. And we are planning to make another check up for our egg when you return from your trip. Now, amor, please sleep; the bags under your eyes are getting very troubling,” Panchito murmured, and that was apparently all it took for Donald to slip under.

He woke to the sun in his eyes, just a bit above the horizon, and an additional weight along his back. Too big to be Ari, but not big enough to be Panchito; José. He sighed in contentment, and felt a chuckle along his spine.

“You looked so cozy, how could I resist?” José murmured, before stretching slightly and, using a breeze of magic, lifting himself out of the hammock without upsetting the gentle sway. Donald rolled onto his back, glancing back at him before checking on the egg.

It was glowing a cheerful yellow, looking less and less red by the day. Was that a natural result of it aging? Or some sign of changing magic? Donald didn’t know. He would bet that nobody did; this tiny miracle of theirs was, as far as he knew, unprecedented.

“Will you be joining us for dinner?” José continued, while Donald slowly sat himself up. He was well versed in getting up from a hammock without falling over, but with an egg in his lap he was overly cautious. José solved the issue by taking it from his lap, clutching it in both hands with a smile.

“I ate early, but I’d be happy to sit and share a bite or two,” Donald replied as he stood, before glancing around. “Where’s Panchito?”

“He offered to pick something up when I got home,” José said cheerfully, waving a hand at the now tidy potted garden. “He finished some time ago, but didn’t want to leave you alone.”

Donald smiled, before another thought occurred to him.

“What about Ari? And Humphrey? I didn’t see either of them.”

José’s smile turned a bit melancholy.

“Ah- apparently our friend, knowing that the cabana is cared for, wishes to travel a touch,” José replied slowly. “He will return, of course, but he has lived here since your great uncle found him, and he misses traveling. Xandra opened a portal for the two of them into the jungle when she was here yesterday.”

Oh.

Donald frowned, wishing he’d been able to at least wish them well, but. It was fine. Ari deserved a trip after so many years cooped up, and it wasn’t like he and Humphrey were in any real danger.

“He promised to return before our egg hatches,” José reassured him, and Donald nodded, before giving himself a small shake. If he got much bluer José was liable to cheer him up with another rendition of *Blame it on the Samba.* And Donald wasn’t really feeling it right now.

“Then I’ll look forward to hearing all about it!” Donald said, with enthusiasm he didn’t really feel, but if anyone would understand it, it would be José.

He led them both inside, José filling the silence with gossip from the airline and the mountains he’d been able to visit in Tennessee before flying back on his last trip. He’d gotten a number of pictures, and was hoping to paint some of the scenes while he was home.

Donald hoped he could snag one for the houseboat, and mentioned it before he could forget.

José beamed.

“I’ll make you one special,” he promised. “Where are you thinking of hanging one?”

Well, Donald wanted it to go in his bedroom, if he was being honest, but he really needed to clean up before he did that. The rest of the houseboat was tidy, but his room had seen better decades.

And set up a proper nursery. Get a bigger hammock so he can have their egg with him. Or his partners, the current one was not designed for more than one. But that wouldn’t fit in his current bedroom, which was more of a storeroom he’d converted, he’d given the biggest room to the boys.

He couldn’t take that room away, the boys’ bedroom was sacred, but the spare bedroom was on the other side of the boat, and he didn’t have anywhere else he could set up a nursery right now. And while the houseboat wasn’t large, Donald didn’t like the idea of being so far away; what if the baby needed him?

José caught his eye with a quizzical look. Donald groaned, rubbing his face.

“I need to do some work in the houseboat,” he explained, “but I really don’t have time. Or the energy.”

He was *trying* to follow José’s advice to stop using so much magic until he has a chance to heal, after all. If he ignored yesterday’s… everything. José gave him a sympathetic smile.

“You do not need to do everything alone,” he reminded him, patting his shoulder. Donald nodded, and turned the conversation back to workplace gossip. The houseboat *was* something he had to do alone. It was his, the thing he’d bought after the fire that had sent him to New

Quackmore, the place he'd raised the boys. It wasn't that he didn't trust anyone else to help. It was that it was *his* responsibility, his home.

It wasn't something he wanted to bother explaining, right this second.

"So, I assume Ravenson has spoken to you?" José asked eventually; they'd settled on the couch, egg pressed between their hips. Donald nodded.

"You want me there with you; worried about doubters?" he asked, but José shook his head.

"I won't deny you being there will help, certainly," he said cheerfully, "But I thought it might be nice to make a trip of it. Panchito can fly separately, his schedule is very forgiving, and if we do happen to run into each other while out on the town, well, who can judge us for celebrating our good fortune?"

Donald laughed.

"You're trying to use SHUSH to set up a vacation?" He asked, still chuckling.

"Eh, I think of it more as a work trip with some… benefits," José replied easily, hand waving absently in the air. "After all, they are insisting I fly all over for what amounts to a few hours' work, I think I deserve a nice evening or two with some pleasant company."

"And if people start wondering why they always seem to see the three of us together?" Donald asked, lifting one eyebrow.

“Technically, none of the three of us have been in one place, if you consider the varying masks being worn at the time,” José pointed out with a smirk. “They have seen Green Bat and Double Duck, and they have seen Green Bat, Paperinik and Panchito’s masked persona. They have possibly heard about Donald, José and Panchito, but they have not seen us.”

Donald shook his head, snorting.

“Somehow I don’t think that will work,” he replied. “But if you want to arrange a SHUSH funded trip, be my guest. We’ll need an egg-sitter, though, if Ari is on his own vacation.”

José looked contemplative.

“I would suggest Miss Bentina, but I think your uncle may cry if we do not ask him first,” he said after a moment of thought. Donald nodded absently, before blinking, sitting up straighter.

“We’d have to lay ground rules,” Donald said slowly, feeling each word in his mouth.

“Of course.”

“No adventures.”

“Naturally, not until they’re older, and certainly not as an egg,” José agreed.

“No traveling at all, preferably.”

“Perhaps a trip to the office?”

“That’s- yeah, that would be fine. But no work trips outside of Duckburg,” Donald insisted, and José nodded, like that was a perfectly reasonable limitation. Like Donald wasn’t a paranoid mess, thinking about how much the idea of their egg being with anyone besides one of the three of them was-

Well.

Donald blinked, rubbing at his chest. He wasn’t *excited* by the idea of leaving their egg. But he wasn’t- wasn’t nearly as scared as he thought he’d be.

He could almost see Scrooge now, egg in its’ carrier across his chest, him chattering to it about stock options or profit margins, telling stories about old adventures while sitting in his office.

He had done so with the triplets, happy to take them so Della and Donald could take a break, always reluctant to return them to their carrier. Always talking, insisted that they needed to hear all their voices so they would know them when they hatched. Joked that it would help them understand his accent, before winking at Donald like they were in on the same joke.

Donald found himself nodding again. He could- he could let that happen.

He felt a smile dragging across his beak.

“We’ll need to get a picture of Scrooge carrying the egg,” he continued, and José laughed properly. “No, really, remember his face when I just asked him to watch it while I was in the bathroom?”

“Ah, I thought he was about to cry!”

“Who’s going to cry?” Panchito called out, striding through the front door with a stack of containers balanced in his arms. Donald hopped up to help him, only just missing the corner of the couch as he did so, stumbling for a few steps.

He managed to catch himself before falling, grinning in victory as he took the top two boxes. Panchito huffed when he pulled away, pursing his beak, so Donald leaned back in for a kiss.

“We were discussing taking you along on our next SHUSH venture, and determined that Scrooge will be very emotional if we ask him to watch our egg while we are gone,” José explained, leaning over the edge of the couch to watch them. Donald nodded, before turning to head to the kitchen.

Panchito, apparently able to get an arm free, tugged him back for another kiss, the food caught awkwardly between them. Donald rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t hide his fond smile.

“That’s assuming he doesn’t have a conniption about us all leaving at once,” Donald continued when he pulled free. “He’s been weird lately.”

“I can’t imagine why,” José replied, moving to set the egg in a small nest under a heating lamp, before walking to the kitchen.

Donald rolled his eyes.

“I’m not saying he doesn’t have a *reason,* ” he said, though in his mind he did admit he hadn’t expected the severity of it, “I’m just pointing it out. Plus, we have no idea when they might hatch. Until we have a timeframe, I’m not sure it’s a good idea to go anywhere, and I think Scrooge would agree.”

“I- I did not think of that. That worries me as well,” Panchito agreed. He looked a bit startled at the idea, Donald thought, and he once again recalled that while this was his fourth time around for hatching, it was José and Panchito’s first.

“Believe me, we will plan nothing until we know that we will not miss it,” José said calmly, brushing his hands on Panchito’s shoulder. “SHUSH can certainly wait if needed.”

“Yes! Of course!” Panchito nodded, eyes wide, before his face split into a wide grin. “We are going to be papas!”

“Yes, we are, did you forget?” José replied with a grin, laughing outright when Panchito stuck his tongue out.

“I am still getting used to having an egg! A baby will be a whole new adventure!” He insisted, while setting the food on the table. His hands waved wildly when they were freed, nearly knocking his sombrero off in his excitement.

“Eggs do tend to hatch into babies eventually,” Donald agreed, dodging a half-hearted swipe at his hat, and heading to the kitchen for plates.

Panchito started dishing everything out, apparently Chinese takeout, while José got drinks and Donald sat down, still tired, and less and less enthused about the upcoming mission.

He’d agreed at the time because he thought it might be a lead to the Blot, and if anything magical was left at Acosta’s he was SHUSH’s only agent that would even know what it was, let alone be able to get anything usable from it. But now, after having gotten so *close,* it felt like a step backwards to be going. He wanted to start ripping the city apart to find the bastard, but he knew that would be pointless.

Donald wasn’t built for inaction. For having to wait and be patient, and looking for clues and hints. Even being a spy hadn’t made him any better at it, despite, well, everything. His missions were usually of the ‘there’s the enemy, destroy them’ variety. Give him a *problem* to solve, and he was good to go; but he wasn’t good at this kind of investigation.

He was going to have to be. He couldn’t trust SHUSH to do it; their delays had cost them the Blot entirely; if they’d moved when they’d first spotted Mme Rouge, they could have *had* him.

Or if Donald had moved faster. That was the crux of it; he could have gone in himself the same day. Could have caught the Blot and been done with it. Could have just taken the information he’d had and taken initiative instead of trusting that SHUSH could handle it.

The next time he got a hint, he wasn’t waiting for approval from somebody else to move in. He’d call Panchito or José, he’d call the heroes, he would even call *Scrooge* if he had to, but he wasn’t waiting

for someone else to give their permission.

He considered his conversation with Ravenson, briefly. He considered the ramifications he might face if Paperinik or god forbid *Donald* got ahead of SHUSH again. He considered how his secret identity had already nearly become compromised in his hunt, and likely would be again if he continued on.

He considered, briefly, the consequences of the path he was contemplating.

And then he tossed the concerns with a shake of his head, and turned back to the conversation José and Panchito had been having over his head, chewing absently on an eggroll. Those realizations could wait until later. Right now he had gossip to catch up on.

Donald sat alone in his row, skimming the mission notes one more time as the plane rose above the clouds. It was a private SHUSH flight this time, C4 apparently preferred his missions done that way. He himself wasn't on board, but the other agents were, milling about chatting or catching some extra sleep in their own seats.

330 was reviewing his own files in the seat across from Donald, apparently oblivious to the other agents.

It was probably for the best; while Donald himself had only gained a few brief glances and one murmured greeting from the others, 330 had received a variety of intensely focused looks. He was the youngest agent on the plane by far, most were Donald's age or older, and even if it wasn't technically known how many missions he'd been on, 330's graduation date to field agent *was.* Everyone was aware this was his fourth mission in the field, and the first investigative one of this

nature.

They wouldn't say anything directly, of course. But they were all looking with curiosity. With suspicion, but that was normal for spies. Everything came with a dose of suspicion.

Donald had no idea how to remove the suspicion, or even if he should. He couldn't ride to 330's rescue every time he ran into agents that doubted him because of his age. But they were bound to have issues if that suspicion turned into doubt in the field. These agents had been hand picked by C4, after all, they were likely to agree with his initial concern that 330 was too inexperienced.

Problems for another time, Donald decided, making a mental note to keep an eye on how they got on when they were mission live.

He sighed, rubbing his neck. Guilt settled around his shoulders; he'd snuck out a bit earlier than he'd wanted to so the kids would be too drowsy to complain overly much as he left. He'd still said goodbye, of course, kissing each of them on the forehead and promising to call when he could, but he knew he could have waited until they were awake to give a proper send off.

It wasn't the kids he was avoiding; they'd been happy enough letting him go, after all. It was mostly Scrooge, and partially Della.

He didn't know what to do about Scrooge; the man had been clingy to the point of suffocation, and now he wasn't saying a word? What was Donald supposed to do about that? Should he be doing anything? Maybe this was Scrooge trying to give him space, maybe it was him reverting back to normal… Donald didn't know. And he hadn't wanted to deal with it before leaving.

Della, that was easier to explain at least. She was just too energetic in the mornings, if she was awake; her sleep schedule was a mess in a lot of ways, but if she was up she was *up*. Donald preferred not to deal with that level of energy right before hopping on his flight. Sure, he *would* feel awake, but at what cost?

"Double Duck?" Someone asked; Donald looked up. Older leopard, scar over the left eye carefully covered by cosmetics. Holding out a cup of coffee.

"Ah- thanks, agent…?"

"G17, sir. We haven't met, but I've read your reports from the soiree," he said, taking Donald's attention as an invitation to sit down. "Do you have any theories about what we might find?"

Donald considered the question, knowing the other agents were likely listening in as well. While some other raids had occurred at other FOWL locations, he was well aware he and 330 were the only agents on the plane that had been directly involved with the more successful ones.

"Hard to say," he finally replied, "We don't know how much Acosta knew about the auction, or any other illegal dealings going on on his property; I know the prevailing theory is that his assistant killed him, but we're lacking anything concrete for a motive."

"Money?" G17 suggested, leaning forward. "Could be blackmailing the other auction attendees and Alvarez may have wanted to cut out the middle man."

"If he did, he'll be at a loss; we stole their records from the auction," Donald pointed out. From the corner of his eye, he saw 330 perk up

slightly, and continued, “Agent 330 lifted it off of Acosta at the party.”

A pause. A brief, considering glance at 330.

“Do you think either of them noticed you take it?” He asked 330 directly; 330 looked up fully at that, frowning.

“Acosta was drunk out of his mind at the time,” he replied, “I don’t know that he would even remember that he took it from Alvarez in the first place. Alvarez seemed more aware, though, so if he asked about it later and it was missing…”

“Say he didn’t, though,” another agent proposed, turning to lean over the back of their seat behind G17. “Might explain why so much paperwork was missing, he didn’t know where it ended up and tried to grab everything.”

“Why wouldn’t he know where it was stored, though? Hypothetically stored, I mean. He was the one running the auction, you’d think he’d be trusted with the paperwork,” 330 pointed out.

“We don’t know if they’ve done anything else,” Donald cut in. “We’ve had them under surveillance, but that was only after the auction. Acosta could have had other parties like this one before.”

“But you don’t think that, do you?” G17 asked, turning back to Donald with a suspicious squint.

Donald tilted his head back and forth in consideration, before shrugging.

“Personally I think Alvarez was a patsy,” Donald said quietly. “And I’m not expecting to find him alive, whatever his initial motive may have been.”

Several people nodded thoughtfully. Donald let out the slightest breath of relief; it was nice, in a way, to talk to people who didn’t want to shrink away from the reality of the situation. Instead of wanting to look at the bright side.

Donald liked optimism, it was a trait he admired, but sometimes he just wanted to point out the grim reality of the situation and *move on,* not debate whether the less likely but kinder fantasy happened instead.

“Do you think he managed to make contact with a blackmail target, and they took the chance to take out the threat?” G17 suggested.

“Or he was the fall guy from the start,” another agent offered, before disappearing back in her own seat. “Did the file mention how long he’s worked for Acosta?”

“He’s been in Acosta’s employ for over a decade, but his move to close assistant was more recent,” 330 called out, flipping through his own file to find the relevant page. “Apparently Acosta used to go through assistants at a pretty rapid rate. There were reports of sexual harassment, but no charges or formal accusations ever came from it.”

“What happened to those former assistants?” Donald asked; he hadn’t had time to read that portion of the file yet, more focused on the immediate elements of the crime scene itself.

“Most seem to have landed alright, but a few we couldn’t find,” 330 reported. “No foul play was suspected, apparently their families aren’t reporting them missing. SHUSH just couldn’t find them.”

Suspicious.

“Were those the same ones accusing him of sexual harassment?” G17 asked before Donald could do the same. 330 hesitated, eyes darting across his notes, before he nodded, beak twisting.

“Not all of them, but most, yes,” 330 confirmed. “I don’t see a single person actually investigating, did nobody *notice?”*

Donald would bet someone had. But Acosta was wealthy; more than that, he was *old* money, and with that came advantages.

“That does raise another possible motive,” he observed out loud, drawing all eyes back to him. “Someone could have been looking for revenge.”

There were several displeased expressions directed at him for that theory. While nobody said it out loud, it was fairly obvious none of them liked the idea of their mission resulting in such a mundane answer.

CSI Costa Rica

Step one of C4's itinerary after they settled in their hotel was to meet with the local police department. An appointment had been set with the *Capitán de Policía* Juan Andrade, but Donald was unsurprised to be foisted off on a harassed-looking Inspector within a few minutes of arriving at the station.

"I don't really know what you're hoping to find," Inspector Hernandez, a short scarlet macaw, huffed, digging through piles of varying folders and reports on his desk, in the small, cramped office they stood in. Donald had left his fellow agents in the main bullpen simply to maintain breathing room.

Donald shrugged in response.

"Acosta was a person of interest in a domestic smuggling case back in the US," he said casually, like it really was that simple. "We're just trying to see if we can find his supplier."

"Well, I can send you with one of my agents to take a look around the villa, but we cleared the scene days ago. We didn't find anything like that," Hernandez insisted, but he looked far too tired to really care.

"I appreciate it," Donald said with a nod. "To be completely honest, I'm not expecting much either, but hey, when the boss tells you to jump, right?"

Hernandez chuckled tiredly, then waved him off. "I'll call and get you a tour; the building is still locked down, so you'll need one of my people with you to get through the security."

Well, they'd need that to get through *officially*.

Donald returned to his team, and shortly they were all shuffled into a rented van. Besides Donald, there were five other agents: 330, G17, the agent that they'd been talking to on the plane, Y77 (G17's partner, as it happened), K83 and V74, The last pair was quiet; their files indicated they were both infiltration experts, and their primary purpose on this mission was to slip around any security they needed to. G17 and Y77 were more often sent after weapons dealers and smugglers. Donald personally knew he was known as a jack of all trades, but he *also* knew C4 didn't really like him, and really had no idea why he'd been chosen specifically.

Nothing to be concerned about for the moment. They rode separately from the officer that was supposed to let them into the villa, so they were able to make a rough plan as they drove along the sunny streets.

"For now, we're playing by their rules, so don't push it if you're told not to go somewhere or get pushback," Donald ordered quietly. "Keep note of anything we're restricted from, but for right now we have permission, no need to piss the locals off this early."

'Agent C4 expected us to need to infiltrate the building," V74 ("Call me Vee") observed quietly. Donald nodded.

"He did. And we may have to," he agreed, internally groaning, "But no need to borrow trouble yet. We have permission to poke around right now, so let's save the breaking and entering for when we need to."

"And the… financial persuasion?" G17 asked. He hadn't mentioned a nickname. Donald shrugged.

“I know he spoke to the Captain before we got here, but the Inspector didn’t make any noises about it. If you feel like it’s necessary, you have my permission to roll forward on it, I’ll trust your judgement,” Donald answered.

If that also meant he could throw them under the bus if the Inspector was angry about it, well, that was how spy work went. So long as nobody got in legal trouble, and everyone got home safely, sometimes you had to play dirty. But Donald’s brief meeting with Hernandez made him think the other man was overworked, not corrupt.

G17 looked troubled at that, lips pulling back into a confused snarl for half a second before smoothing back over. Whatever he’d been thinking, he didn’t say.

They were technically skipping steps two through four of C4’s detailed itinerary (Provide monetary persuasion, to both the Inspector and Captain, isolate and speak to assigned agent), to go straight to the building. Donald could see Vee skimming said itinerary from where he sat, and hoped she wasn’t going to raise a fuss.

He *had* said that he would stick to the plan when necessary. But it was hardly needed to bribe anyone when they were letting them go ahead with the plan without it, and the assigned agent was meeting them at the villa, so no need to isolate them in advance for information, and no way to do that anyway.

The villa was a beautiful building, though not nearly as large as Acosta’s mansion in Spain had been. All white, with terracotta tiles, large archways framing a number of entrances, balconies and patios. The entire building was surrounded by lush green plants and a few small gardens, and as they rounded the drive Donald could see a pool in the back. He could smell the ocean air, but there seemed to be a distance between the villa itself and the beach.

Was there a path down? A dock, boats, anything on the beach? That would have been a potential escape route if there was a way down, they would have to look into it.

The entire view *was* slightly hampered by the varying milling officers and agents, who watched them approach with thinly veiled annoyance.

Donald didn't blame them; they *were* interfering agents, from another country even, and the locals were probably expecting them to get in the way.

"Ah, Agents," a tall mouse called, striding up to them. "Our Inspector called ahead of you; he said you wanted to look around the villa for evidence?"

Donald nodded, stepping up.

"Yes, though he did warn us you've already been over everything with a fine-toothed comb," Donald replied cheerfully with a wave. "We just need to tick off some boxes on the report, make everything official."

The agent (del Mar, per his nametag) nodded, tail twitching with annoyance that their face didn't display.

"Yes, well, we *have* looked over everything, as you said. I'd be happy to go over the full report with you, instead of having your team troop through the crime scene," he offered. "I would hate for you to waste your time."

Donald let out a sigh, only slightly exaggerated.

“We do need to look around,” he said, apologetic, “Procedure, you know how it is. We don’t all need to go in, though, if that will get in your team’s way?”

Del Mar huffed, but nodded; clearly Hernandez had already ordered they be given access, or Donald would bet that he would have blocked their request. He strode away with a quick call of ‘I’ll get you a tour guide!’

“G, can you two look around the villa?” Donald ordered immediately, under his breath. “Our official cover is that Acosta was a smuggler, focus on anywhere he could have hidden items.”

Two nods, all business. Donald considered 330 for a moment, before adding, “330, if they don’t protest us sending too many people, go with them. You were involved with the translations on the original auction list, see if you can find anything that looks similarly coded.”

G17 frowned, but didn’t protest. Good.

Donald turned to Vee and her partner.

“Talk to the other agents here, see what you can learn. If you find a chance to slip away, I want to see how accessible the beach is; we don’t know where the killer escaped to yet,” Donald continued, and Vee gave him a thumbs up.

Del Mar reappeared, with another agent to lead the team through the villa. 330 walked behind them without anyone protesting, so it was Donald alone that was led to their small on-site base of operations. Which was nothing more than a single tent set up in an open area of

the yard, where their loose reports and paperwork were held down by a variety of rocks clearly plucked from the gardens.

“What exactly are you looking for?” del Mar asked, leaning over Donald’s shoulder as he quickly sorted through the reports.

“Anything that might have been tied to the smuggling,” Donald replied absently, scanning the list of missing items reported by the staff. Papers, folders, all of which had apparently been left in the open in Acosta’s office most of the time. Boxes of, supposedly, more paperwork, missing from a bedroom. “His customers aren’t talking, and we’re trying to find the supply end of the chain before they get another middle man.”

“What are they dealing in? Anything I should be worried about?” del Mar asked, now sounding concerned. Donald considered the question for a moment, before shaking his head.

“Nothing dangerous that we’re aware of, mostly antiquities,” he decided on, since as far as they had been able to tell the auction items had been delivered to the site the same day as the auction itself. “I know Alvarez is the prime suspect, and we’re assuming that anything in the villa worth taking is gone with him. But have your people found anything unusual?”

Del Mar considered him for a moment, frowning. His fur ruffled, in irritation? Discomfort? Hard to say.

“Nothing substantial,” he said, but he was frowning. “My agents have all reported feeling… nauseous when in the villa too long. You’re certain he was only dealing in antiques? Not anything more dangerous?”

Donald slowly straightened up, feeling his face go cold.

“Nauseous,” he repeated. “Any other symptoms? Paranoia, hallucinations? Feeling like they’re being watched?”

Del Mar stared at him, beak twisting.

“You’re making it sound like the place is haunted,” he said, in a tone that might have been a joke in some other universe. Donald shook his head.

“Not haunted,” he said. “Infested. You should have your team get checked over; it sounds like the place might be full of mold.”

“Mold?” He asked, head tilting to the side. “You think there’s mold?”

No, Donald thought that the Blot’s equipment, or perhaps the man himself, had stayed here and infested the building with his strange, rotting magic. But that was much harder to explain.

The idea of the Blot getting to stay *here,* in tropical paradise after his escape from prison made him sick to his stomach.

“We’ve found traces on other items we’ve been tracking, and those sites had the same issues,” Donald said, half true and half inventing on the fly. “Stands to reason it’s the same thing here.”

“Something from where they’re coming from, maybe. Have you tried to track the strain to see if it can be regionally tracked?” Del Mar

asked, and Donald felt his beak tick up in a pleased smile. Sure, that wouldn't be helpful in *this* case, but it was a good idea if the issue was indeed mold.

"We've got some folks on it. If you don't mind me poking around with the building empty, I'm apparently a bit more prone to the effects than most people, might be able to see if there's a source still in the villa," Donald offered; it would give him the chance to look around for magic specifically. Del Mar nodded.

"Wouldn't mind; even if it's not evidence, I'd like to know my team isn't being exposed to something hazardous. I'll be ordering masks for them either way, but if we know what rooms are worst off, that would help."

"I can do that," Donald agreed easily, and he went back to the reports.

The staff had only known that the safe was empty, not what was stored in it, so they had nothing to go on there. Boxes of some kind of paperwork had apparently been stored in an unused bedroom, now also gone. It could be nothing important, of course, but who kept boxes of paperwork laying around?

But apparently not a single employee who had been interviewed so far had been remotely interested in looking in any of the boxes, so their contents remained a mystery. They all insisted it was paperwork, but if nobody had even looked inside it really could be anything.

More auction items? Had Acosta branched out and started storing things for some of his clients? Actually smuggling, perhaps? If the beach was accessible, they could feasibly be shipping things in and out from the coast, if they were small enough to not gain attention going back and forth.

Or it was just records of something benign. He shouldn't get ahead of himself.

Donald was getting sick of the feeling of magical decay.

It coated every surface of the villa, making what should have been a pleasant and open space feel cloying and rotten, every shadow flickering with ill intent and every corner threatening to hide a threat.

The theatre had felt the same, but he'd assumed at least part of that had been because of the ghosts lingering in the building and his own anxiety, the very structure of the underground labs automatically setting him on edge. But with this open, beautiful villa giving him the same vibe, he had to admit it was something purely magical.

He thought briefly of when magical meant something good or awe-inspiring, instead of it just another type of problem for him. There had to be a time when he hadn't associated it with the Phantom Blot, or Kingdom Hearts, right?

Del Mar trailed after him while Donald went from room to room, pausing here or there to try and see if the feeling was stronger or weaker.

One room in particular was so overwhelmingly *wrong* he had to take a step back when he opened the door.

"I'm guessing this is where the boxes were stored?" He asked, and if

del Mar had doubted him before, he clearly didn't now, based on his surprised confirmation.

The room was a relatively plain spare bedroom, and there were still outlines on the bed from where some of the boxes had sat. Donald walked forward cautiously, and let his fingers trail just above the bedspread.

Something had been here. A power cell? One of those guns?

Why would Acosta have agreed to host the Blot's things at all? They'd suspected he *might* know more about his party guests than initially thought, given his untimely demise, but there was a gap between that and holding onto dangerous weapons long-term. How involved was he? And if not him, then how did Alvarez get involved? It had to be one of them, the rest of the staff were local and had no reason to travel to Spain to organize an auction.

Unless it was a network…

No, don't overcomplicate things. Yet. The simplest solution was that Acosta or Alvarez had been involved with the smuggling/auctions, and that Acosta's death was at least somewhat related to that. The simplest answer was usually the right one.

Del Mar stepped out of the room, holding up a buzzing phone as explanation, while Donald peered around the room with a frown. There wasn't really anywhere a hidden compartment or door could be hidden in here, not with the layout of the building. Too little space between different rooms to hide things between the walls.

Donald checked that del Mar was still in the hallway, before casting a subtle spell around the room. It felt *disgusting,* like he was running his

fingers through a rotting corpse, viscera and gore dripping from his fingers as he sifted through trails of leftover magical energy. There was nothing fresh. Well, nothing about it was *fresh,* but nothing here was recent. Likely days or even weeks old.

He made a note to confirm when Gandra had been moved to Duckburg.

“One of your team asked to head back to the station to look at the body in the morgue,” del Mar informed him as he came back into the room. Donald nodded, letting the magic go from his hands before turning around. There shouldn’t be anything visible unless del Mar was also magically trained, but couldn’t be too careful.

“The body?” He asked, surprised. “Has an autopsy been completed already?”

Something he probably should have asked before they came out here, but hindsight was twenty twenty.

And C4’s itinerary hadn’t even *had* an autopsy on it, he thought with a dark chuckle.

“We’re sending out some samples for testing, but the preliminary conclusion is the bullet wound. Our doctor saw something unusual during the early tests, though, and Agent Vee wanted to see it in person.”

Interesting. Her file hadn’t mentioned any medical background, but maybe she’d recognized something.

He continued his tour of the villa, but nothing here felt any newer than the bedroom. He hadn't expected anything, anyway, but at this point he didn't want to assume anything. He hadn't expected the Blot to be in Duckburg either.

His phone buzzed. Donald grumbled to himself, yanking it out.

Della. He rejected the call, shooting off a quick text of ' *at work!'* before shoving it back into his pocket.

He continued walking, trying to count steps and make sure the walls *here* weren't thick enough for anything hidden-

His phone buzzed again. Della. He rejected the call. She hadn't texted him anything.

A third time, before he could even put the phone away. Scrooge, this time. Donald rejected it, only for *another* one from Della to start coming in.

"Excuse me," he said to del Mar, and ducked outside, his phone buzzing with calls and calls and more calls-

He got outside. Far enough away from everyone that they shouldn't be able to see or hear him. Cast a spell for anti-eavesdropping while he was at it, then answered the last one.

His hands were still ripping the modulator off as he snapped a *"What?!"* into the phone.

“ -and it’s going to be *epic,* you need to convince your guys to come along- oh, you picked up!” Della said cheerfully, completely unbothered. “I-”

“Della, I am *working,”* Donald snarled, temper snapped in half, plastic phone case creaking under his fist. “ *What* was so important you had to call me *twelve times?!”*

“Oh come on, you weren’t answering!”

“Because I’m busy!”

“You work some stupid office job, it can’t be *that* important-”

“Della if the next words out of your beak aren’t either an explanation for why this was *so important* or an apology I am going to *block you,”* Donald growled, and Della let out an annoyed huff of air, like he was being unreasonable.

“You answer the kids every time,” she grumbled.

“They only *call* me when it’s important,” he retorted. “Otherwise they *text,* which you could have done since this apparently wasn’t important! I’m busy!”

“Yeah, what else is now? You’re *always* busy!” Della snapped. Donald growled wordlessly.

“What are- hey!” Della said, clearly to someone else, and there was a

shuffling sound. Donald debated hanging up.

“There, what was so- Donald? Is something wrong?” Scrooge asked, sounding baffled and not a bit worried.

“You tell me,” Donald growled back. “Della called me and won’t say what was *so important-”*

“You can *not* be this interested in *paperwork-”* Della shouted from somewhere further away; Scrooge had clearly stolen her phone.

“- that she had to call me *twelve times!”* Donald continued on. “Plus stealing *your* phone, I guess.” He added after a moment's thoughts, since Scrooge’s name had popped up once. Had Della thought he was ignoring her specifically?

“What? Why would-” More shuffling, conversation Donald couldn’t quite catch. He glanced around, eyeing the garden he’d stepped into.

It was less a garden and more of a cleared area of the jungle, leaves and branches twisted into a sheltered area with a few scattered seats. It was certainly nice, calming.

It *reeked* of rotting magic. It was older here, but stronger. Much, much stronger.

This had to be from the Blot himself, not just his equipment.

He turned to face the villa. He could see the window of the room he’d

been in earlier, and even from here could just make out someone standing in the room. This clearing would make an excellent vantage point, should one need it.

But why would they? Everything indicated that Acosta had been in on- well. The auction. Did they know for sure he'd been involved in anything afterwards?

Why would the Blot even be involved, though, if Acosta wasn't helping move the power cells? And why would he be down here specifically? The Phantom Blot wasn't exactly a…nature fan.

Donald turned the other direction, facing into the trees. The ocean was that direction, he didn't know quite how far.

There was a small, worn trail that wandered into the jungle just in front of him, half hidden by overgrowth.

And now that he was listening, the jungle was entirely silent.

" -pete's sake! Donald, you still there?" Scrooge was saying in his ear. Donald made a vague noise of confirmation in the back of his throat.

"Della wanted to see if you'd be willing to join us on this adventure when you've finished your work trip," Scrooge started to explain, while Donald started to walk towards the trail. Every sense was blaring alarms, his feathers were sticking up on the back of his neck.

"And forgot that for you it's the middle of the bloody work day," Scrooge continued. Donald pushed his way past the leaves.

Beyond the first few plants, the trail widened; clearly the opening had been allowed to overgrow, but this trail was well maintained.

By who?

“ -Donald?”

“Sorry, I need to get back,” Donald replied distractedly. “You can text me the details, but I probably won’t be able to fly and join you, sorry.”

A pause.

“It’s- that’s fine lad, it was just an idea. Sorry this disrupted your day-”

“ *I’m* not sorry-”

“We’ll let you get back to it,” Scrooge cut her off with a huff. Donald snorted a laugh, already walking.

“Talk to you later,” he said after a moment, and hung up.

He yanked the modulator back on before he continued down the trail. It really wouldn’t do to ruin his secret identity in the middle of a mission.

Again.

Mangroves

Donald was going to be sick.

He was getting tired of finding Phantom Blot labs.

He was even more tired of finding the remains of his victims.

He'd walked until he found a small clearing, which was probably once a nice place to look out at the ocean, but now was a festering wound in the earth, spreading death and decay from an ancient tree, split right down the center like it had been struck by lightning.

From one side, a dryad, half-formed back into a bipedal animal of some kind, frozen in a last desperate moment of panic. Her wooden hands were still outstretched towards the sea.

Had there been someone she was reaching for? A potential savior? Or had she been warding them off?

Donald sighed, low and shaky, and walked closer. The ground crumbled under his feet like volcanic ash. Everything in a ten foot radius around the trunk was dead.

His hands brushed the bark, and he had to bite back a *scream*- the pain, the burning yawning emptiness of magic being shorn away and leaving a void that could never be filled-

Donald scowled. The ground crumbled under his feet. He could feel

the rot spreading, slowly, outwards. Ecosystems were delicate, interconnected things, and a tree this old had roots that spread for miles. The death would spread, take more and more and more, and for what? For the Phantom Blot, or one of his weapons, to drain a bit more magic from the world, convert it to decay and darkness that festered in the mind and the soul and killed whatever it touched.

He wanted the Blot *gone.*

The dust he'd disturbed flitted about on the ground, but the surrounding trees prevented more than a slight breeze from reaching him; everything settled back into stillness.

Everything was far too still. Jungles should be teeming with life. It felt like he was standing in a tomb.

A tomb that was collapsing under his feet.

If he left it- if he didn't *fix this,* the entire area would slowly die. And nobody would know *why,* they would just know the plants were dying and the animals had fled, that anyone staying nearby was getting sick-

He thought about the detonations he'd already seen, from the Blot's power cells, and was abruptly grateful that *those* explosions dissipated instead of lingering. He would have to revisit the theatre lab though, shore up the magic there before the ghosts were pulled into a black hole the ripped out magic had left in the fabric.

But first he was here. And here lay a much larger problem; a dryad, or whatever the local term might be, was a magical creature, not just the general magic energy of a place. And she was *dead,* there was no getting around the fact that the tree was a corpse.

What would even happen if he tried to pour magic back into it? Blot victims couldn't retain magic afterwards, but that was for mages, not creatures. Could he fix the magic core of the tree? At least block off the gaping wound so it didn't keep sucking in everything around it?

And what would that even *do?* His magic was oceanic by nature, and he had nothing else to offer, but a dryad was *earth* magic. Something that should be so easy to wield, but was still beyond him. How would the area react to a completely different magic flowing in? Was it even going to help?

He felt the edges of the rot spread, just a shade, just another blade of grass further.

Well. Would it make anything worse? That was the real question. And he thought he already knew the answer.

He reached for the ocean. It jumped to his hands like it was eager to fill this; oceanic magic couldn't be taken, but he supposed even it could be drawn to what was effectively a hole.

Now, he poured it in streams and waves first onto the edges of the rot, washing away the spreading decay until things felt solid, no longer collapsing into themselves but simply existing, a gap in the flow but not a spreading one. His hands tingled and burned, a reminder he hadn't healed the damage from the lightning spells, his feathers crackled with energy. He was already aching, his chest burned and his head throbbed.

And that was the easy part. The hole remained, no longer spreading but still a blight on the landscape. He didn't know if his fix would even stick, or if it could wear off and start the process all over.

His eyes drifted to the dryad's face, frozen in a last moment of terror and pain.

She deserved better.

He reached for the water again.

It felt *wrong,* like going the wrong way on a One-Way street, everything in him fighting against pouring energy into what felt like a bottomless pit, feeling like he was standing at the bottom of the chasm and forcing the water down *on* him, through him, fighting the flow towards the sun while still forcing more power behind him.

He coughed, once, twice, salt on his tongue and his chest heaved with the effort, straining for air against the crush of water.

Donald grit his teeth. He wasn't the water, and he wasn't in the waves, he was in a *boat.* A ship in a storm, he was tied to the mast, not struggling in the darkness, the *ship* was thrashing in the waves, not him-

His feet felt wet. Everything was cold, and tight, and his eyes burned from the salt water that pressed around him, but finally, finally- he felt it hit the bottom of the hole. The ends of the roots, the furthest reach of the dryad's power, and then he could begin filling it back up.

The waves thrashed and screamed, there were birds calling and shrieking around him, the wind felt like it was howling in the storm, but *Donald was tied to his ship.* He would not fall back into the water. He was a *sailor,* not the sea.

The roots and then the base and the trunk and what remained of the branches, the dryad's partially fled form the last of it. They fought him tooth and nail, but the alternative was a festering wound, so whether they liked it or not he was clearing this infection of rotting magic. Filled with water, not earth, but he could already feel things shifting and moving, the wood absorbing the energy it was given and doing what it could.

He was kneeling on the ground, Donald realized. His knees were wet with mud. He was gasping, the burns on his back and the scars on his chest throbbing to a beat that echoed from his hands.

José was right, Donald lamented, coughing and hacking against the taste of salt water, feeling the spray leave his mouth. He really needed to cut back on the magic before he ripped his scars open all over again.

Donald fell forward, catching himself on his hands, but they were all but numb now and he slid onto his elbows with a muffled hiss of pain. God, everything *hurt*.

"Sir?"

Phooey.

Donald looked up, forcing himself back up onto hands he couldn't feel.

330 stared back at him, from outside the ring of death. A few steps behind him, del Mar stood, but he wasn't-

He wasn't making eye contact. He was turned away, his shoulders were shaking, his feet were outside the circle.

"Your eyes, sir," 330 hissed, and Donald bit back a comment about calling him *sir*.

He closed his eyes. He could feel the rope in his hands, the wood under his feet. The wind on his face, the rock of the waves.

Donald docked the boat. Stepped onto the shore. His toes felt cold, plastered with mud.

Opened his eyes. 330 looked relieved.

He stood up.

The tree was still dead. Still a jarring blackened stump in the middle of a dead clearing. But he could hear tentative birdsong. The breeze felt a bit fresher, the decay melting away like ash in the wind.

He shook out his hands. Feet. Rubbed his eyes. His suit was soaked in sea water, he honestly looked like he'd taken a swim.

The dead ground was a tidepool, water rippling around his feet. Some of the roots of the dryad tree were exposed now, reaching down to the deeper ground. The ash and dry, dead dirt was even now washing away in the gentle waves of water.

He'd- had he dragged the ocean closer?

Had he changed the coastline?

Something to worry about later! Because he had *certainly* just revealed a huge part of his identity to both 330 and a *near stranger.*

Donald shook his head, ears echoing with screaming and the rage of a tropical storm.

Wait- no, that wasn't his mind. He looked out at the coast. Or, where the coast used to be.

Dark clouds were gathering on the horizon, and fast.

"Uh, sir? Are you alright? We just found you collapsed in the water," 330 said. Just a *bit* too loud to just be speaking to Donald.

Donald paused, tilting his head to look at 330. What did he mean by-

Del Mar was still standing outside the water, but 330 was in it. Based on where del Mar was standing, he would have mostly seen Donald's back. If he hadn't been obviously glowing at the time, maybe he *hadn't* seen anything?

330 clearly *had,* though. And was covering for him.

"I- got distracted," Donald said, in a sheepish voice, pitched just so del

Mar could also hear him, relieved that his voice modulator was still working. “Must have slipped, might have smacked my head. The villa reeks of the same stuff we found all over the- other buildings. Made me dizzy.”

“I thought you said it wasn’t dangerous?” del Mar called, turning now to look at them. He looked embarrassed, like he was seeing something he wasn’t supposed to.

“It shouldn’t be, I’m just a bit more sensitive, like I said. Don’t have your team stay inside too long and have them leave if they’re getting dizzy to get some fresh air. But it’s nothing more than a bad smell,” Donald answered, tugging his tie off and wringing it out.

“If you were dizzy, why did you come all the way out here?” 330 asked.

“I got a phone call and was looking for a more private space to answer it,” Donald started, before he shook off his distracted thoughts and recalled *why* he’d done so. “Then I noticed the path we’re on had a perfect view of the room they were storing things. Wondered where the other end of it was.”

Del Mar glanced around.

“My folks didn’t come this far into the jungle,” he said thoughtfully. “Alvarez’s car was missing, body was found right away, didn’t see much point in checking the woods.”

The dryad’s eternal scream wasn’t visible from where del Mar was standing. Donald forced his aching body to move away from the tree, 330 hovering close as though to catch him.

“Since we’re looking for smuggled goods, I wanted to know if there was any way in and out the staff wouldn’t see,” Donald explained absently squeezing water out of any parts of his shirt he could get a grip on. It would be wrinkled beyond repair, but he couldn’t do much about that.

“I’ll send a few more people to look around. Might not find much with that storm rolling in though,” del Mar said.

330 chuckled. It sounded strained, but Donald thought it was because he knew the other agent so well.

“Yeah! I’ve heard tropical storms can come up fast, but that is incredible!” He said with cheer, gesturing behind him. Del Mar laughed. He seemed much more welcoming than he had when they’d arrived; Donald had to wonder if one of his other agents had made a good impression or if he was just that amused by finding Donald in a puddle.

He listened to the other two chat as they got back to the path Donald had veered off of to reach the dryad. They started back towards the villa.

Donald went the other way. He still wanted to see the other end of it, and the storm wouldn’t land for a bit.

He heard footsteps pause, turn, trail after him.

“Sir?”

“You don’t have to call me that,” Donald replied immediately, glancing back at 330. Who shrugged.

“Your cover name is Agent Dee,” he replied, “I’m worried about misspeaking. Del Mar went back to the villa to get his team, by the way.”

Donald nodded.

“What are your initial thoughts?” Donald asked. 330 hesitated, stepping forward so they were walking side by side.

“That you’re trying to change the subject,” 330 replied. “What *was* that?”

“That,” Donald said slowly, “was a victim of the Phantom Blot. The tree was what remained of her body.”

“I- “ 330 began, before going silent, face twisting thoughtfully. He remained silent for several minutes as they walked.

“Anything I need to know right now?” He finally asked. Donald glanced at him with mild curiosity.

Just that? Just wanted to know what was the most time-sensitive?

Donald snorted with surprised laughter. Of course he was. 330 was a very focused agent, after all.

“The damage was months old, nothing seems recent. So no, we’re in the same position we were in before, but there was at least one Blot style weapon being housed here at some point in the past few months that we need to find.”

“You’re certain it wasn’t one of the ones we’ve already found?” 330 asked.

“This would have had a full battery. It *could* have been one of the ones from the auction, maybe? Hard to say how long ago she was killed,” Donald replied bleakly. It wasn’t like there was a branch of magical forensics to do a detailed examination, after all. The only way they would know is if someone knew when her tree had died.

330 nodded again, looking sick. From where he had been standing, 330 would have had a perfect view of the dryad’s face.

Donald slowed, then stopped entirely.

“Are you alright?” He asked. “Seeing a dead victim isn’t easy.”

330 stopped as well, and stared at him.

“I- oh.” He said slowly, eyes slowly widening and face going pale. “Victim. Right.”

He looked away, hands wrapping around his torso.

“That was her body,” he muttered. “We can’t even- we can’t even give her a funeral. Or- was that what you….” He trailed off. Donald didn’t reply.

330 continued standing there, breathing deeply, before visibly reigning himself in and standing up straight.

“Later,” he said, mostly to himself, but Donald nodded anyway.

The path wound its way to the ocean, which crashed into a rocky shore with a very small, clearly maintained, beach area. No signs of a dock, but a small boat could feasibly pull up to the shore with minimal issues that Donald could see immediately.

The water reached out in an unusual curve towards the dryad’s grave. He wondered if it would settle deeper into the soil over time, appear more natural, or if it would wash out with the tide, never to be seen again.

Agents Y77 and G17 were already there, with a few local agents; it looked like there was a more traveled path closer to the villa. But while their path opened straight onto the beach, Donald and 330 had emerged a short distance away, their approach hidden by the plant growth and trees.

Donald peered over their rocky landing to the water. It was deeper than he would have thought; more of a cliff edge than a beach; had they carved out the beach area, or was there a sheer drop off just beyond it? Normally he *could* reach out magically and see, but he was still feeling off and struggling to bring his mind back to normal. The last thing he should be doing right now was diving back into the ocean.

“Not much of a secret path,” 330 noted, glancing around, “You can see it from the villa.”

“But you can’t see anyone approaching,” Donald pointed out. “And if you met someone midway through it, nobody would know.”

They made their way to the rest of the group, who were already discussing possible ways to dock a boat along the beach and what size wouldn’t arouse suspicion by the Coast Guard. The conversation was interrupted by their arrival, and del Mar, approaching from the other side, calling everyone out to head back inland, the storm was gathering to be a doozy.

In the scramble, Donald’s team was split up into two vehicles, mixed with del Mar’s team, so they weren’t able to speak about anything during the drive. Donald could feel 330’s eyes on him often, while he tried to ignore the still-tingling ends of his fingers and the chill that had settled in his bones.

Hopefully his trembling could be written off as a normal chill from the dropping temperature, or because of his ill-timed dip.

Del Mar stepped away to speak to Hernandez, waving them off as he did; Hernandez looked surprised by his attitude. Which was mildly interesting, but not currently relevant. The other agents dispersed, leaving the SHUSH team at odds. There wasn’t enough space in this building to give them anything resembling an office or base, they would have to do all of that at the hotel later.

Not the worst thing, as it meant they were less likely to be observed when checking in with C4 and SHUSH, but inconvenient in the moment. Donald could call him, were he inclined, but his itinerary called for a call later in the evening, and Donald *had* agreed to follow it where possible.

Was he being petty about it? Possibly. But he was already getting dubious looks from G17 when he ignored the step they were currently on (send agents in to infiltrate building), to check in with the autopsy results instead.

Agent Vee was still at the morgue, her partner with her, so the rest of their group took a second ride over to meet them rather than making a call. Apparently service was iffy at best during a storm, and they were likely to lose connection if they tried.

“Any initial thoughts before we get there?” Donald asked the car at large as they drove.

“Why are you all wet?” G17 snarked.

“Took a tumble into some mud when I found a Phantom Blot victim.” Donald snapped back without hesitation. “Anything useful?”

“There was a Blot victim?” Y77 (who apparently went by Yellow) asked, leaning around to peer at him with concern.

Donald nodded, sighing.

“I’ll explain in detail when we have the full briefing tonight, but yes, there was a victim. Del Mar didn’t recognize her as such, so right now they’re unaware. Do not inform them until I say so,” he ordered.

Nobody asked why. Donald would like to think it was because they were respecting his authority, but it probably just meant that they had

no questions at all. 330 at least might be holding back until they were able to talk privately, but the others? Donald was worried he was seeing more of the 'in the box' thinking he'd struggled to address with his first class of students.

"We didn't find anything in the villa on first inspection," G17 reported. "No hidden compartments or places to hide files. Locals are right, it looks like Alvarez, or whoever killed Acosta, cleaned house when they did."

"We did get permission to speak to some of the staff members," Yellow added, "But apparently most of them are new. Acosta has frequent turn-over in his staff; nobody has worked with him for more than a year."

Which matched the other information they had about him, Donald mentally noted. Seemed he was good at chasing off all levels of employees, not just his personal assistants.

"That means they wouldn't necessarily know if things were being taken in and out," G17 noted. "Or if they did, they might not think it was strange."

"We don't know what they might have had on site," 330 pointed out. "Besides at least one Blot weapon, the things from the auction were pretty random. Even if they did see someone moving something, they might not have realized it was something to pay attention to."

"Let's say anyone coming or going is of interest," Donald said. "At least until we can narrow down if Acosta was involved as anything other than a middle man."

They arrived at the morgue, a basement level space of a larger

hospital, where Vee was talking at high speeds with the coroner while K83 stood back, clearly lost. They walked over as soon as the team arrived, leaving the pair to whatever they were speaking about.

“The doctor mentioned something about the cells looking odd under a microscope,” K83 muttered to them, “Then I lost the plot. Something about cell eruptions, which I’m betting was not as interesting as it sounds.”

Donald blinked. Autopsies weren’t his forte, his cases usually had a pretty clear cause of death, but that sounded… unusual.

“Do they think the cause of death was wrong?” He asked, glancing at the pair. Vee seemed delighted, talking more now than she had the entire plane ride and drive they had shared so far.

“If they do, I didn’t hear it,” K83 replied with a shrug. “I’m guessing this was something else, though. Poison, maybe.”

Which would imply that whoever killed him wanted to cover their tracks, possibly. But what would it change? A gunshot clearly pointed to murder, there was no gun found for it to be self inflicted, so what would they be trying to cover up?

“Agent Dee!” Vee called, apparently noticing them for the first time and darting over. “Sir, we have an update! A significant one!”

She all but skidded to a stop, looking as excited as Dewey after mastering a new dance move.

“We were looking at the cell slides,” she started, as the doctor reached

them, “because there was soft tissue damage that wasn’t consistent with decomposition.”

“The body was found a few hours after Acosta was reportedly seen,” the doctor added, nodding to them all. “Even in our heat, that isn’t enough to cause significant decay regardless, so I called in a few tests.”

“Yes, and I thought it sounded familiar, so I came here to confirm and the cell slides show significant damage!” Vee jumped back in. “From the formation of ice crystals!”

“ *Ice* crystals?” G17 demanded, eyes wide. Vee nodded.

“The body was frozen!” She announced with academic glee, while Donald felt only dawning dread.

“If he was frozen, though,” 330 said, looking at the sheet-covered gurney in the center of the room, “who did the staff see the night before?”

Death is a bit of an Ominous Title, Isn't It?

That announcement landed like a match to an anthill; Hernandez was scrambling to get more people involved, calling in every member of the staff, new or previous, trying to determine how, exactly, a man who had reportedly gone to bed one night and been found shot in the morning had *also* supposedly been frozen somewhere for what they were estimating was at least a few days.

“Further tests will be needed,” Doctor Starling informed them gravely, though she also looked a bit intrigued by the whole mess, “but the time it takes a body to become frozen solid is at least a day or so, I would estimate, and then they would have needed to thaw it out afterwards before replacing it in the crime scene.”

The storm landed as they reached their hotel; while Hernandez welcomed their team to assist in exploring this new information, he was also of the mind that keeping people at the station during a thunderstorm tended to end in them getting trapped there overnight, and, as he told them with a wry grin, “there aren’t enough couches and blankets in here for my folks as it is.’

Personally, while Donald appreciated the idea, he *was* concerned that the staff might find themselves unavailable for additional interviews the longer they waited, and was anxiously waiting for the storm to pass so they could gather witnesses before they found other places to be.

Like a freezer, apparently.

“Does anyone remember seeing a freezer that large at the villa?” Donald asked the group as they gathered in a conference room at their hotel, spreading out the crime scene reports and photos they’d taken with them.

“No sir,” G17 replied from where he was setting up a laptop to video call C4. Donald wasn’t looking forward to it, but better to get it over with.

“They did have a large walk-in fridge in the kitchen; could the temperature have been set low enough to freeze a body?” Yellow asked, rummaging through the photos to pull one of the kitchen. Donald glanced at it, tilting his head.

“They’re usually not capable, but it’s possible,” Donald said thoughtfully. “But it would have been hard to hide *that* from the staff.”

“They could have all been in on it,” Vee suggested; she was rapidly typing out a report of her own, probably the medical one if Donald had to guess. “Saves the trouble of hiding evidence on site, if everyone there already knew what’s going on.”

“Then why would Alvarez disappear? Why not just toss the body and keep pretending everything was normal for longer?”

“Maybe everyone except him knew?” 330 suggested timidly. “Or they planned for him to be the fall guy? He was always going to be the top suspect because of his position.”

“You’d think he would have noticed his boss was on ice, not giving him orders,” G17 retorted, but looked thoughtful regardless. “Fall guy might be it, though. Everyone knows he’s top suspect, so they set things up and let him take the chance to run, which looks even more guilty. Then they’re home free.”

“If that was the plan, they probably already killed him and tossed *his* body into the ocean for the sharks,” K83 spoke up. “Why not? You’ve already killed one guy, at that point cover your tracks properly.”

C4 called in before they were able to continue that line of thought, though Donald personally agreed that, whatever else was happening, Alvarez was almost certainly dead.

The report went smoothly for about three minutes, before the reveal that they had gone off script almost as soon as they were off the plane.

“There was no need to offer ‘financial persuasion,’” Donald said clearly, though he was tempted to just sigh, “They’ve been incredibly cooperative since our arrival. Offering a bribe will make them suspicious of us at this stage.”

“We were given full access to their reports, evidence, I was even allowed direct access to the body,” Agent Vee jumped in, smile manic but eyes calculatingly calm. “Which brings us to the biggest reveal- Acosta’s body was frozen before it was found. Our date of death is off.”

“What- why would someone freeze his body?” C4 asked, distracted from his building rage, and Vee’s face shifted to satisfaction. Slightly offscreen, K83 caught Donald’s eye and grinned.

“Unclear yet, sir, we only discovered it this evening, right before a storm landed and sent everyone home. We’re hoping for more detail when the test results arrive.”

“Our prevailing theory is that someone wanted to disguise the time of death, but we’re stuck on motive at the moment,” Donald continued, taking the lead again. “Alvarez is our prime suspect, but it seems he

had the run of the villa already given the volume of things he reportedly took with him when he fled. And the staff reported seeing Acosta the night before."

"Body double?" C4 suggested, leaning in slightly. "If his staff is turning over as often as you reported, it may not have been him."

Donald nodded, conceding the point.

"Do we have any surveillance photos from the party auction?" He asked the room at large, glancing at 330 in particular. "We can show them to the staff and see if they're able to identify him. We've been assuming they would know Acosta on sight, but we should verify that before drawing any conclusions."

They continued on, before Donald got to the grove.

"I located the body of a magic user, specifically a dryad, apparently drained of magic, midway between the villa and the beach on a small walking path. There's no easy way to tell how long she was there." He stated clearly. This earned him a few baffled looks.

Was dryad not a common word to most people? It wasn't like *Donald* would know one way or another.

"Why didn't you report that to the locals?" C4 demanded immediately, twisting to glare again; if Donald had thought, briefly, that his grudge would go away while on this mission, he was sorely mistaken. "They could have started running forensics before this storm landed-"

“Her body is a dead tree, Agent C4.” Donald interrupted, drained and exhausted of this already. “They would have said ‘this is a dead tree with a disturbingly lifelike face in the bark.’ Until we develop a team of magic forensic scientists, we won’t be getting more information than that.”

Silence. C4 rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“And you know this is a… dryad, rather than a face in the bark… how, exactly?” He asked, tone hovering just short of condescending.

“If I may, sir, the body was pretty clearly not a natural coincidence,” 330 hopped in. “And the entire area around the trunk was dead, like some kind of blight. Which lines up with how Paperinik described magic draining to look in a natural environment.”

Donald blinked. Paperinik had said no such thing. This was an entirely *new* problem in fact-

But 330 was the only person here that would know what PK had said at the theatre.

“That isn’t in any of our reports,” C4 replied, looking deeply unhappy. 330 let out a sheepish chuckle that was entirely fake.

“I haven’t had the chance to update my full field report from the theatre, sir, we had to prepare for this mission immediately,” he said with a wince. “Protocol dictated I prioritize the upcoming mission since the note didn’t appear to be time sensitive information.”

C4 huffed. Scowled, looked around like he was hoping for someone to

disagree. But 330 had apparently said the magic words, because C4 eventually moved on without argument.

“Is there any information we can get from the body, by your estimation? It seems you’re the expert,” C4 asked, looking back at Donald. Donald considered it, internally wincing at becoming the expert when he’d tried *very* hard not to be.

“If I can go back out there unobserved for a bit, I may be able to find something,” he offered after a moment’s thought. “But offhand, nothing besides it being a Blot weapon. And we already knew that at least one of his guns had been onsite.”

He let the other agents confirm they had noticed the ‘mold’ that had been present in the theatre, based on the report from PK and the other heroes. He didn’t want to wade into it. C4 accepted it with his usual grace, and they wrapped up shortly afterwards.

Donald considered it a victory that he didn’t mention their itinerary again.

With no new information coming in, they wrapped up to get some sleep; Donald personally was ready to drop, and could only credit spite for staying standing this long, given the, well, everything that happened in the last few days.

Well, the others did. Donald and 330 retired to their shared hotel room (ah, budget missions, Donald did *not* miss them), and Donald got to check his phone for anything new before a polite cough called his attention to the other issue.

He sighed. Glanced around the room. Gave in and checked the room for bugs.

330 was nice enough to give him time to stall.

“Alright, go ahead. I know you’ve been dying to ask all day,” Donald finally said with a sigh, dropping to sit on the bed. 330 watched him from the desk chair.

330 was silent for a long time, chewing on the inside of his cheek.

“When you said you knew some basics about magic,” he asked slowly after several minutes, “you were, what, being humble?”

Donald felt one eyebrow rise, slowly.

“330, we live in Duckburg,” he replied after a moment. “Which has a confirmed magic terrorist running around. Again.”

“Oh.”

He paused again, frowning. Donald could say, for sure, that he had no idea what was going on in his head.

“I guess I’m not all that surprised,” he said eventually. “You always seemed to know what was going on before anyone else.”

Yes, Donald thought with dark amusement, normally because it had nearly killed him.

“What did you do, though? With- with the dryad?”

“Something ill-advised,” Donald answered quietly, feeling the resistance in his mind. “Killing her left a gaping hole in the magic there, that’s what was killing everything around it. Like a sinkhole. I was trying to shore it up before it could spread further.”

“Did it work?”

“Guess we’ll see. It wasn’t exactly a textbook spell,” Donald said with a grim laugh. Then he sobered up. “330, I need to be clear; this does *not* leave this room. For a long list of reasons, some of which I’m sure you can guess.”

330 nodded, and the conversation died.

“What did you even see? You and del Mar,” Donald finally asked, when the silence grew stronger.

“Well, del Mar was a ways behind me, I think he just saw you fall in the mud,” 330 answered thoughtfully. “I, ah- your eyes were glowing? And the water level was rising, but I think that was just the tide…”

It was not. But Donald wasn’t going to tell him that.

“So, the mold thing- is that actually what it is? Paperinik said it was, but…”

Donald debated for a moment, before shaking his head.

“The Blot- something in one of his early experiments exploded or backfired, left him permanently scarred with a magic scar. It reeks of rot,” Donald explained carefully. “Anywhere he stays too long starts to- well. Have the same issue.”

“So, it’s like a magical fungus? And he’s the source?”

“More or less,” Donald confirmed. “Since you’re not magically trained, it won’t do much to you, just smells bad. Might make you dizzy.”

“And for you?”

“It’s… disorientating. Magic feels hard to reach. The smell sets off your instincts that something is wrong in a way that’s hard to explain. It shouldn’t exist. *He* shouldn’t exist like that. The backlash should have killed him.”

“Why didn’t it?” 330 asked, and Donald’s face felt frozen in a grimace of rage and helpless fear.

“Nobody knows for sure,” he answered, and his voice didn’t feel like his own. “But the theory is that even the earth doesn’t want him. The earth won’t let him die.”

The storm raged and screamed, battering against the windows. Donald could feel the faintest traces of magic in it; not a magically created storm, but fed from a spell.

His, really. He couldn't pretend he didn't know why the natural world was freaking out. He didn't know quite what he had done, but he wasn't stupid; it hadn't been natural. Except in the way that all things were natural.

Even death. Even decay. But Donald had sought to reverse that flow, and he had no idea what the consequences might be.

He went to the roof of the hotel. There was a small covered area up top, barely sufficient to keep the rain at bay with the howling wind, but at least it was something.

He didn't have to wait long, anyway.

"Donald Duck," the voice said. It was the sound of dry skin tracing over parchment, the hiss of scales on stone. The rain stopped hitting his head.

He turned around.

Death looked a lot like they had when they'd first met, their skeleton resembling a parrot's with a full traditional headdress. They were wearing a classic cloak, though, and had transformed their scythe into a large umbrella to cover them both from the rain.

Death looked down on Donald. Their face was, as always, hard to read without flesh over the bone, but Donald thought they looked annoyed.

Not exactly a new thing for him.

“Do you know what you’ve done?” Death asked. Politely. Like they were asking about the weather.

“Not really, no,” Donald replied honestly. He couldn’t rightly say he knew what would happen from pouring oceanic power into a gaping wound in the magical fabric of the area left from murdering a dryad. Usually death was a natural thing, the body turning from life to death through the process of decaying, before new life sprang from the remains. Mushrooms and fungus, maggots and flies, eventually plants and flowers and new animals coming to eat. The circle of life. Normal. Natural.

There was nothing natural about what the Blot had done.

Death considered him, glowing light emitting from their eye sockets. They clacked their beak a few times, something Donald thought was the equivalent of clicking their tongue.

“Pity,” they finally replied. “I was hoping you had some idea.”

Donald blinked.

“You don’t know either?” He asked, befuddled. Surely if anyone in the universe would know what would happen, *Death themself* would be it?

Death shrugged, cloak rippling in the breeze.

“What you did is unprecedented,” they replied casually. “Perhaps nothing of importance will occur when the storm dies. Perhaps the

world will end. It matters little, to me."

They considered him for another moment, head tilting to one side.

"The ocean would have fought you," they observed, "if she didn't wish to help. Even you must bow to the whims of the elements."

Donald considered the struggle he'd felt as he'd poured water and energy into the sinkhole. At no point had it felt like the ocean *itself* didn't want to flow into the gap; it was keeping it from dragging him down with it that had been the struggle.

"I will be curious to see the results tomorrow," Death continued thoughtfully.

"Are you expecting anything besides a dryad stump?" Donald asked, confused. Ocean magic wasn't fast-healing like earth magic; even if he'd fixed the sinkhole, the plants would still be dead. Life would come back, but not as soon as *tomorrow*.

Death laughed. Their laugh was the crackle of a campfire and the rustle of the leaves in the wind.

"How little you realize," Death chuckled. "You have done far more than simply cleanse the body of sickness and rot."

So saying, they swept away, leaving Donald standing in the storm under the small, meager shelter. He was shaking.

It wasn't from the cold.

When the storm subsided, it did so only technically; the skies stayed dark and grey, threatening to continue at any moment, and a sharp breeze continued unabated from the coast.

The villa was crawling with agents, carefully stepping around puddles of water and mud to scour the grounds with a fine-toothed comb for anything that might answer where Acosta's body had been stored and why it had been frozen in the first place.

Del Mar was of the opinion that Alvarez himself might have been posing as his boss, with a different person entirely posing as Alvarez. They were trying to gather up the staff members to interview again, this time with photos of the two men, in the hopes of confirming their theory.

Donald sent his team out to join the locals, both in assisting and to search for any further evidence of the Blot, since C4's official order was not to involve the local investigators in that part of the investigation. Donald didn't argue.

He did use the chaos to slip back down to the dryad grove, chewing on his tongue.

The trees and undergrowth had perked up just off the beaten path, cutting off the dead grove from view. It *could* just be the rain had given it all a needed drink to recover from several people stomping through. Donald wasn't naive enough to think that was it.

He pushed through, carefully, stepping only when he was certain he

wouldn't crush something underfoot. Roots and leaves brushed up against his ankles, still wet from the rain. Above him, the sky rumbled ominously.

Then, the tree.

Or, what was left of it.

Apparently, sometime during the storm the split portions of the trunk had cracked clear to the ground, and half of it had collapsed into the still flowing water around the exposed roots. The other half, which held the face and hands of the dryad, was still standing, but there was a dark hollow inside, showing that the interior of the trunk had been rotting away while leaving the outer edges and bark largely untouched.

Donald stepped closer, carefully placing his feet on the thicker roots, testing each for strength before he set his foot down. The water wasn't deep, probably, but he didn't want to find out exactly how much had flowed in between the storm and his own work.

Below him, in the murky depths, things flitted in and out of the shadows. Apparently the fish, at least, had already found their way in. There was no plant growth in the water, that was still the ashy decayed ground of the day before, but Donald would bet that wouldn't last long. If the rot was gone, new life would spring from the ashes of the old.

He stepped closer still, circling to where the dryad had been reaching out. He didn't know what to expect.

Her hands were still there, but waterlogged and soft-looking like rotted wood. Her face had changed, somehow. Less desperate and

afraid, more resigned and relieved. As though she had been released from some kind of torment overnight.

Maybe she had.

Donald stood, looking but not touching anywhere on the trunk, and trying to determine what to do. SHUSH would expect some kind of report for this, to confirm the victim being killed by the Blot (and, honestly, that there was a victim at all), take photos and crime scene evidence. Well, here was the crime scene: a waterlogged dead tree with a face and hands that appeared ready to sink into the water at any moment.

Here was the victim, a spirit most of the world would have never known existed, who had lived her entire life in this place, likely had mothers and aunts and daughters spread in the miles of jungle around them that had felt her death and wouldn't have been able to report it even if they had thought to do so.

Had they felt it, when he'd forced power back into the place their sister stood, forcing the rot and creeping hole back from consuming the entire grove? He hadn't noticed other dryads here, but tree spirits could be tricky; some species came awake early and stayed long, others had only brief moments of true consciousness before slipping back into a restful doze, nurturing their children for generations without ever waking. Some never woke fully at all.

This tree, in this moment, had been awake enough to try and run, or beg for help. He didn't know if there had been anyone to answer her.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the trees and the ferns and the rippling water. "I am sorry."

The grove had no answer for him. It felt quiet, somber. Yesterday had felt like death here, a decaying body in an enclosed room. This space felt like a funeral.

“Sir?”

Yellow was on the path, peering over the undergrowth at him; she’d been one of the ones helping scour the grounds for any evidence of another structure where a freezer could have been housed, Donald recalled.

“Is this the other victim?” She continued, leaning a bit further but not quite walking through the plants. She seemed a bit unnerved by them, if he was being honest, ears erect and tail flicking sharply back and forth.

Donald nodded, not quite wanting to speak and break the strange silence.

She nodded back in response and, after seeming to consider it for a moment, stepped carefully over to join him. Unlike his webbed feet, her more delicate paws struggled on the wet wood, but she seemed reluctant to use her claws. He couldn’t blame her for that.

When Yellow circled to be able to see the dryad’s face, her own expression fell.

“Oh…”

He didn’t know what she had expected. But clearly this wasn’t it.

A breeze whispered through the leaves.

“You found… her, like this?” Yellow asked in a low tone. Donald considered, then shook his head.

“The water wasn’t here yesterday,” he admitted, though Yellow wouldn’t know that he was responsible for it. “And the trunk was still in one piece. I think the storm fast-tracked clearing out some of the blight.”

She glanced around with surprise.

“I figured it was a mangrove tree,” she replied with a frown, and Donald-

Stopped. Looked around.

“Huh,” he said.

That was exactly what they were standing in, wasn’t it. Mangroves. Trees that by nature lived in saltwater. He’d seen them before, he was fairly sure.

Had they looked like that before yesterday? He couldn’t remember, and the tree was dead, he didn’t know them well enough to identify just by the remains of the bark, and the wood was rotting away anyway-

Wait.

He took a step, and peered closely at the base of the trunk, in the section where the split had happened.

In the center, just above the waterline, was a tiny, nearly invisible leaf, reaching for the light.

… that was just a new tree, right? He hadn't- Death couldn't have meant-

This was just the next generation, growing in the roots of the old. That was *it.*

Donald sighed. Even he didn't believe himself.

At least dryads took care of themselves, even at the sapling stage. He couldn't exactly bring this one home with him.

Unexpected Reunions

They took a few photos of the area and of the dryad's face before the rest of her form could disintegrate, then left the grove. Yellow made a soft noise as they reached the path again.

"I feel like I should bring- flowers, or something," she admitted quietly. She looked perturbed by her own reaction.

"I wouldn't recommend cut flowers," Donald replied with slight humor. Then he sighed. "Never really gets easier, does it."

Yellow huffed a dry laugh, and shook her head.

"This *particular* scenario is a bit more unique," she pointed out. "But no, it really doesn't."

Del Mar hadn't noticed their absence; his own team had, but they said nothing.

Since their previous itinerary had gone the way of the dodo, C4 had drafted and sent them a new one this morning. First steps were to re-evaluate the crime scene for additional information on the Blot's weapons or victim, then join the ongoing search for a viable freezer for a body to be stored in.

Which reminded Donald that 330 had made *up* facts about the Blot's weapons during the report the night before. Or, well, made an assumption that turned out to be true, and which wasn't the largest leap in logic he could have made, but an assumption nonetheless. But Donald couldn't exactly call him out on it. Double Duck would have

no reason to be doubtful about anything except Paperinik's previous experience at best, and even that was a stretch. Paperinik had no reason to ever hear about this at all.

Not that he necessarily needed to call him out on it, since Donald was fairly certain 330 had just been trying to help support *Donald,* but he did need to know where his head had been at. Lying to C4 for convenience wasn't the worst thing he could be doing, but it could be a concern.

Yet another thing he had to put on the list for later.

"The real question," del Mar said in a huff, hunching over a map of the area and making notes on locations already searched, "is how far they could have transported the body outside of the freezer. The second it was in the heat it would be thawing; I doubt anyone would want to move it far."

"Unless the freezer was in a vehicle," Donald suggested with a frown. "Then they'd just need to get to the building."

"The staff didn't mention anyone driving up, and the property is gated, so they would have had to let them in," del Mar replied. "There might be video coverage of that entrance, actually, we'll get the footage to confirm."

But Donald was already thinking of something else.

"What about a boat?" He asked, turning to look at the water. "They could have brought it up to the beach and carried it up in the dark. Then carried Alvarez off with the boxes of files. The staff didn't see him leave either; there's no surveillance from that part of the property."

Which struck Donald as suspicious. Wouldn't you want to make sure nobody could come up to your house by sea, when it would be far easier than driving up for most people?

But of course, you wouldn't want to have evidence of who was coming and going from that side if you were, potentially, smuggling things in and out from there.

Del Mar nodded, and wrote another note on the map, this time around a nearby cove.

"The cliffside is hard to approach; too many rocks that way," he said, tapping the other side of the map with a thoughtful frown. "If they're coming in or out, the cove is the safest point."

"Any eyes on it?"

"None, this area is mostly undeveloped, but we'll confirm with the Coast Guard if there was any recent movement."

His tone clearly indicated he didn't think they would be getting far with that. Which was fair; a boat that was just moving Alvarez and a few extra boxes wouldn't need to be big, and there was no shortage of people around this area with a catamaran or fishing boat. It might be faster to narrow things down to who *didn't* have a way to travel by sea.

"Sir! Sir!" Someone was shouting, and Donald turned to look out of habit, but it wasn't someone looking for him this time, they were aiming for del Mar, clutching a police radio.

“Someone found a body in the lagoon!” The officer announced when they got closer, panting slightly. “Some tourist said it washed up during the storm. Male robin, mid thirties; we think it might be Alvarez!”

Well. Donald couldn’t say he was surprised; he’d said several times he expected to find ALvarez dead. But washed up in the storm was unexpected; had he been killed and dumped, or had the storm interfered with some attempted escape?

“How far is the lagoon from here?” Donald asked, drawing both agents’ eyes to him. “Could we go take a look?”

“Uh, well, it’s pretty close…” the new agent stuttered, looking at Donald like his suggestion was insane. “But, well, there’s something- that is…”

“Spit it out,” del Mar snapped, looking like he was about to shout. “We’ve got a body to identify and a whole mess of a case to resolve, whatever it is can’t be that weird!”

“There’s some kind of- of sea monster? That was with the tourist guy. Or, was nearby and he said he knew her,” the agent forced out, like they couldn’t find the words to describe what they wanted. Which, considering what he *had* said, was fair.

“A sea monster?” del Mar asked sarcastically. “What, no mermaids?”

Donald, who realized that, under the circumstances, a sea monster showing up wasn’t that unexpected, winced minutely. Death *had* warned him what he did was unprecedented. Who knew whose

attention he may have attracted.

Or what.

“Sir, I know this sounds ridiculous-”

“Good, then you can get to-”

“ -but a giant tentacled *thing* was sitting in the water when we got there, with this guy sitting nearby like there was nothing wrong. Julio saw it himself, he’s not going to make that up!”

Del Mar considered him with a dubious expression, before glancing at Donald.

“Well, Dee, want to see a sea monster?”

“Sure, why not?” Donald asked, shaking his head. “Wouldn’t want to miss the opportunity.”

Vee ended up joining him, wanting to see the body more than the sea monster; the others opted to remain at the villa to continue the search for the freezer. Which was a touch surprising, until it occurred to Donald they likely didn’t believe there was an actual sea monster involved at all. He was possibly the only one that was assuming the report was genuine; even del Mar seemed more exasperated than anything.

The only one who was convinced was the agent who had brought them the report, Diaz, who clutched his radio with a scowl as they drove. His eyes were glued to the window, where occasional glimpses of the ocean were visible through breaks in the trees.

“Did the witness say anything else?” Vee asked after a few minutes. “About the body, or what they saw?”

“He said they’d been driven into shore by the storm, and when he woke in the morning, the body was lying in the sand. He said he dragged it out of the waves to keep it from getting pulled back out by the tide, then called us. Said he ‘knew better than to touch it normally,’ but figured we wouldn’t be happy if he lost a body right after telling us about it,” Diaz reported distractedly. “Didn’t seem that fussed to be near a corpse, apparently.”

Possibly concerning, but you never knew how someone would react to seeing a body for the first time. Donald had seen shock, fear, rage, even baffled laughter. And there was always the possibility their witness had seen a body before.

There was, of course, also the possibility that they were the reason Alvarez was dead. Sure, it would be supremely stupid for someone to linger so long, when they had had days to potentially escape, but that didn’t mean it was impossible. People could be very, very stupid.

The lagoon was a semi-sheltered space tucked under a steep rocky overhang, not quite deep enough to call a cave. Their drive there consisted of getting to the beach and taking a speed boat the rest of the way in; there was no access by land, unless they felt like climbing down a sheer rock face.

The cove was already occupied as they pulled up, by a few other boats and a number of agents, most of whom were nervously watching the

waters around them instead of whatever their presumed jobs were. Clearly whatever creature had been seen had decided to head out.

A tent had been set up on one end, so they went there first; Donald's feet got soaked in the water, which was pleasant. He got a brief press of *curiosity* and *pleasure* as the waves crashed, some other being in the nearby water; the creature? Something else attracted by his earlier actions? He didn't think the dryad would be able to wake up yet, she'd only been a small seedling, but what would he know?

Unprecedented, Death had said. Even the second oldest force in the universe had no idea what to expect.

The tent was protecting the body, which was heavily waterlogged and had clearly been snacked on by at least one critter, given the damage. Most of the victim's feathers had fallen off on the visible areas of the body, but their clothing had clung on and protected the feathers there enough to identify the species.

There was a hood still over their head, peeled back enough to see their face. Donald took a deep breath and leaned over to look, forcing himself to be neutral.

"Agent Dee?" del Mar asked, coming up behind him. Donald tilted his head in thought.

"I can't be completely certain," he replied slowly, "but I do think this is Alvarez."

"You've seen him before?"

“Briefly, at a distance. But I’ve seen enough photos to say there’s a resemblance,” Donald answered. Between the water and the decay, he wouldn’t swear to it, and he didn’t want to jump to conclusions. Just because it was a convenient answer didn’t mean it was the right one.

Vee circled over, looking at them both before turning to the body with interest. She didn’t speak to either of them.

“We’ll run DNA to be sure, but that’ll take time,” del Mar groaned. “And if this is him, that raises the question of where everything from the villa went.”

Donald nodded absently, peering at the body closer. There were no obvious wounds that he could see, barring incidental scrapes and cuts that were just as likely to be from the crashing into the rocks as he came to shore during the storm.

“Any initial thoughts?” He asked Vee after a moment, pondering an option himself. Vee spared him half a glance.

“Offhand, no immediate signs of trauma,” she replied. “The preliminary report says they didn’t see anything either; we’ll need a full autopsy to know for sure, but given where we found him…”

“You thinking drowning? Capsized boat during the storm, maybe?” Donald suggested; she nodded.

“That’s my initial guess, but unless a boat washes up somewhere it’s just a loose theory. The water is cold enough to stave off decay, though, so it’s possible he’s been dead as long as Acosta.”

Del Mar was already walking away to order the search for any potential capsized boats in the area, ordering someone else to see if Acosta *or* Alvarez had anything registered to them that was currently missing, confirming when the boat to move the body to the morgue would arrive, when-

"Mitzy could search for any wrecked boats in the area! She can cover a lot of ground and doesn't need to breathe air like we do, so she would be invaluable in a search!"

Donald froze.

No. No, it couldn't- of *all the places*-

Slowly, casually, he turned to look over his shoulder.

Standing in the group of agents that he'd seen when they landed was a lanky loon with a bright red knitted cap.

Fethry Duck.

Of course it was Fethry; nobody had been able to reach him in a while, since he was sailing the world to study krill. Sailing with…

Well. Mitzy would probably qualify as a sea monster. Though describing her as having tentacles really didn't match with his memory of her. She was a *krill,* not a squid! Krill didn't even *have* tentacles.

Great, now he sounded like his cousin.

None of this would help him with the biggest problem; Fethry was going to know who he was. And unlike Gladstone, who had been just distracted enough to not out his identity at the auction, Fethry was far more likely to just shout his name the minute he saw him-

“Agent Dee?”

“ … and she’s really a wonderful companion, the boats just startled her a bit, but don’t worry, I can call her back! Where should we start searching?”

Fethry was gesturing widely, grinning like a loon, normal sweater soaked but he was still *wearing it,* he was going to get sick the idiot-

“Is that our witness?” He asked, just to pretend he cared about the answer. “Offering to have his sea monster friend search for a capsized boat?”

“Yeah, sure sounds like it. You want to handle interrogation, or should I?” Vee asked. A reasonable question, and one Donald should have an easy answer to. But they were spies. There was no such thing as a simple question.

If Donald agreed to take the interrogation, there was the obvious threat to his identity. Something he should safeguard by avoiding being in Fethry’s direct eyesight. But if he said that *Vee* should do it, there was the opposite issue; why would he not do it himself? Especially when she was clearly more experienced with bodies than he was.

So sending her would make her suspicious, and might reveal at least part of his identity, but if he did go he was almost certainly going to end up revealing his full identity to everyone here.

He opened his mouth to answer, but before he could do more than draw breath, he was interrupted.

“Oh, hello! I heard you’re looking for smuggled goods? I mean, I heard that the ship we’re looking for might have had smuggled goods *on* it, or at least were on it before it sunk. Do you know what Mitzy should look for?”

Apparently, Donald thought with a deep breath, Fethry had decided to come to them.

Donald turned around. Fethry was still walking up, one of the agents trailing slowly after him but clearly keeping their distance. Fethry’s eyes met Donald’s and, with no other options, Donald tapped a finger to the tip of his beak and stepped forward.

“Hello, I’m Agent Dee. Yes, we are looking for some smuggled goods, Mr…?” He said calmly, leaning into the modulator as much as he could, emphasizing that it wasn’t his usual voice. Fethry blinked, once, twice, head tilting to the side.

Please believe it, Fethry, come on-

“Oh, Fethry! Fethry Duck!” Fethry announced brightly, giving them all a cheerful wave; he wasn’t much for physical contact if he didn’t know you already.

Donald let out the slightest, smallest breath, but didn't relax.

"We know a number of paper files were taken from the villa, but there were some boxes that we don't know the contents of," he explained, like this was an everyday thing that he and Fethry did. "How do… Mitzy's senses work? Does she have normal eyesight?"

"Well, her color vision will be limited underwater, but she should still be able to see pretty normally since the bay isn't very deep compared to her normal swimming areas! See, we trained together in an undersea base, so she's pretty used to the deep ocean," Fethry told them; Donald could see Vee backing away a touch, just enough to plausibly be distracted by something, and the local agent that had been with Fethry was lingering outside of earshot entirely.

"We may be looking for something besides paperwork," Donald revealed on a whim, "It would look kind of like a gun but with a glowing battery on the back. If she sees it, tell her to not touch it directly, okay?"

"Oh, sure, I can tell her! Should I do that now?"

"Let's wait until Inspector del Mar clears out the other boats," Donald replied, "So she can surface easier."

Vee choked on a laugh that she disguised as a cough.

"Oh, right, that makes sense!"

Del Mar was not enthused by the idea of sending the boats away on Donald's word. He was less enthused when Hernandez, over the radio,

asked him to do whatever it took to solve the case and solve it *fast.* It sounded like there was some pressure coming down from above to get the now double murder off of their books.

Fethry cheerfully waited for the other boats to leave, whistling to himself. Donald eyed him for a minute, then sighed and tugged his suit jacket off, which he handed over to Fethry's clear bewilderment.

"Oh, I don't need a jacket, I'm not going anywhere fancy!" Fethry insisted, waving his hands in front of him. Donald rolled his eyes, while Vee, still nearby with the body, let out a baffled noise.

"You're soaking wet," Donald said evenly. "Please just take the jacket, you've got to be freezing."

Fethry blinked at him, frowning, before he slowly took the jacket. He glanced down at his sweater, like he was seeing it for the first time.

"Oh! Huh, guess I did get a bit wet in the storm. And then dragging the, um… the other guy out of the water," he said slowly, face falling slightly. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Donald replied gruffly. He watched from the corner of his eye as Fethry tugged the sweater off, then pulled the jacket on and buttoned it enough to be mostly decent. They were birds, so there wasn't anything to reveal anyway, but social pressure to be at least partially covered was strong. Donald didn't even know what species had started it, it was just a thing now, but sometimes shoving clothing over feathers and fur seemed like the stupidest thing ever.

But his shirt did hide the feathers on his back, which hadn't finished growing in yet, so he'd take the coverage today.

Fethry settled into the jacket, shoving his hands into the pockets. The thankfully empty pockets; Donald had kept his things in a pocket dimension. He'd learned early on that it was best not to have anything he couldn't afford to lose in his outer layers while working. Too often lost to fire or bullets or falling into the sea.

He really didn't know how Fethry would have responded if he'd pulled Donald's phone out.

Finally, the boats were cleared, del Mar was standing near them with a doubtful look on his face, and Vee was openly recording on her phone; apparently she'd determined that if Double Duck believed in it, it was worth believing.

That belief was vindicated when Mitzy finally emerged from the water, waving her- okay, he guessed the mandibles did look like tentacles- at them, shell flickering varying colors.

"Folks! Please let me introduce Mitzy!" Fethry announced happily, while del Mar stared at the rising creature like he was having a religious experience.

Wait until he sees how Fethry communicated with her, Donald thought to himself, watching the flickering colors absently. That would give him a shock.

Beside him, Vee let out a low whistle.

"When it rains it pours, huh DD?" She asked cryptically. He snorted in laughter.

It really really did.

Interlude: Fethry and the Super Secret Agent

Chapter Summary

> I've got stuff happening this weekend and might not have my laptop, so! Early chapter! Please enjoy this interlude from Fethry, Sir. Takes Forever To Get To The Story!

Fethry snuggled into the warm, dry jacket, watching Mitzy as she carefully slipped back into the water with her mission. The police and other people watched her closely, before slowly going back to whatever they had been doing before.

He hadn't realized he was cold. Traveling with Mitzy, he'd gotten pretty used to being damp all the time; it came with the sea spray. He just stayed in the sun until his shirt dried. But the cave wasn't very warm, and the clouds above were super dark and gray, so they wouldn't be drying him off anytime soon. And the police hadn't wanted to move him once he said Mitzy would probably follow them.

He knew some people found her scary, but if they just got to know her, they'd realize how brilliant she was! How many giant krill could there even be in the world?

"Do you think there are more krill like Mitzy?" Fethry asked out loud, tapping his chin. The lady agent that was examining the person Fethry had found let out a small laugh.

"If you mean her size? Maybe. But I doubt there are any others who can communicate like she can. Or at all," the super secret agent next to him replied, glancing at him with a small smile. His voice was smooth, pleasant, like one you'd hear on TV. Fethry thought it was nice.

Fethry smiled back. He liked that guy. And his jacket was warm. Even

if Fethry didn't need a fancy suit jacket right now.

Mitzy didn't take long. She was a smart girl, and the cove they were in funneled lots of things this way, so she found the boat right away. She was incredible. He went over to tell her that while the police around him swarmed to look at the boat she'd carried back.

They were looking for boxes of paperwork, which were probably destroyed, since paper and the water didn't mix very well. Maybe it was special paper, though? Spies might have waterproof paper.

He turned to the secret agent that was still with him, eyeing the boat from a distance and frowning.

"Do spies have waterproof paper?" He asked. The secret agent looked back at him for a moment.

"Probably, yeah. But this guy wasn't a spy," he revealed quietly, like maybe it was a *secret.* That was cool. Fethry liked secrets. He was good at keeping them.

"Why were you looking for him?" He whispered back, rubbing Mitzy's leg. He couldn't pat her head without climbing up, but then he wouldn't be able to talk to people, and they asked such interesting questions!

"We think he stole things from a nearby house," the agent replied. "And then got caught in the storm."

Ohhh, that made sense! Fethry nodded. They were trying to catch a criminal, and Fethry had found him first.

He glanced at the tent where they'd put him; a boat was coming by later to take him to the hospital, where, he guessed, they'd figure out how he died. Cause it might not have been the water that did it; if someone was mad about him stealing things, they could have caught up first.

He felt bad for the guy; he'd spent all night protecting him from the elements, the water and the rain and sand, but it didn't really matter. Fethry was just protecting the shell; the person was already gone.

He didn't like to think about it.

The storm had been *crazy*. It had come out of nowhere, drove him and Mitzy into the beach because while Mitzy could just go underwater, Fethry couldn't, and they'd found this little cove to watch the storm. It was loud, and the rain fell like someone with a giant bucket was pouring it down from above them.

But it had felt so *alive*. He'd wanted to go run and dance in the rain, but Mitzy wasn't very good at dancing, and really, he wanted his cousins to dance with. He could go alone, but.

But dancing in the rain was a cousin thing. He *always* asked his cousins to do that. Even though he hadn't seen them in a while. It hadn't been as long this time, he'd seen them when they'd fought the Moonlanders, but the time before that had been…

Long. It had been a long, long time.

Long, and lonely, as people left the lab one by one, as the rooms became unusable because they flooded and Fethry couldn't maintain

them all, as he called on the can phone and never got an answer.

It was fine, that nobody had answered. There was no rain to dance in underwater anyway. Dripping ceilings didn't really count.

He didn't even know if anyone had had a can phone. Well, Uncle Scrooge had, but he was really busy. His cousins, though, he didn't think they had a can phone. Which meant they wouldn't have heard him calling anyway. So it was fine.

Fethry had probably been quiet too long. He was always too loud or too quiet, too much or forgettable and not enough.

"Dee! Come take a look at this!" Someone shouted on the boat. The one Mitzy had brought up. The secret agent glanced over, then back at Fethry. He frowned.

"Stay here, alright? I'll be back in a minute," he said, and didn't leave until Fethry nodded. Then he was walking towards the boat too.

The local police watched him walk up, Fethry noticed. They looked curious, maybe? Or confused? He wasn't great at reading faces. He knew they weren't watching him right now, though, so he let his face fall into Mitzy's leg. Just leaning there. Just breathing. It felt nice. If he focused hard, he could drown out the sounds of the people around him and just hear the ocean. The waves crashed into the rocks and the beach and each other, and there were gulls flying overhead screeching.

He wanted to give them something to eat. It seemed like gulls were always hungry. But he didn't have anything. He and Mitzy had been planning on stopping for food soon, but they'd been caught by the storm.

“Er, Mr. Duck?” Someone asked, appearing at Fethry’s elbow. Fethry popped up, smiling.

“Someone asked me to give you this, guess you probably haven’t eaten, huh?” The officer said, handing him a few power bars. “They’re not much, but we can get you something at the station when we leave here. Or I can ask someone to bring something.”

They glanced at Mitzy, who waved back. They swallowed loudly.

“Guessing you might be stuck here for a while,” they continued. “In-in case they need to search the area more or something.”

Fethry nodded, taking the bars. The labels weren’t in english, so he didn’t know what flavor they were, but that was fine.

“Thanks! It’s funny, I didn’t even think about food until a minute ago; someone on your team might be psychic!”

The officer chuckled. That was nice, someone laughing at his joke. It meant it was a good one.

“Yeah, I guess this is probably a bit distracting,” they told him, then looked at Mitzy again. “So, um, how did you meet…?”

“Oh, this is Mitzy!” Fethry exclaimed, shoving the bar into his mouth and swallowing heavily so he could talk.

He explained how he'd met her and the rest of his krill team, how he'd trained them, the fissure that had caused her mutation. He got distracted and explained part of the Moonlander situation, but mostly just the parts where they found Donald on an island and got back to safety.

"Your cousin was stuck on an island for weeks and nobody noticed?" The officer asked, watching Fethry closely. "And your *other* cousin was stuck on the *Moon?"*

"Yeah! Well, we didn't know she was on the Moon, we searched there. Or, Uncle Scrooge did. But I guess Della wasn't easy to find, cause it took years after that for her to get home," Fethry explained. "And Donald crash landed on the island, but… I think he was supposed to be on vacation? So nobody knew he was gone? I don't actually know the story, I was traveling at the time…"

"Sounds like your family gets into a lot of weird stuff," the officer replied after a moment. Fethry laughed.

"It's pretty normal at this point!" He explained, laughing again. Donald getting stuck on an island wasn't even the weirdest thing that had happened to him!

Although it was pretty lucky that Della and Gladstone had both gotten to the island. Cause if they hadn't, how would they have found Donald?

He didn't like thinking about that.

He ate the other bars. They tasted like sand, but he didn't think they were really made of sand; his tongue just didn't want to work right now. Weird, but weirder things had happened.

The officer left, after giving Fethry a waterbottle and saying they'd have someone bring him a sandwich. They also asked if Mitzy needed anything, which was very nice of them, Fethry told them that, but Mitzy was fine. She just needed to dunk under the water every once in a while.

He sipped the water, and patted Mitzy's head, and watched the officers swarm the boat, and yell about something, a blot? That got everyone yelling louder, and then more talking, more people arriving, and then-

The secret agent from before, the one who had given Fethry his jacket, was back, looking tired, and he led Fethry to a boat.

"We're heading out; we've got you a hotel room for the night. You can leave after that, but in case someone has more questions about how you found the body, can you make sure to be somewhere they can call you?" The secret agent asked as they boarded a boat.

"Oh! I, um, don't have a house…?" Fethry answered slowly, as their boat took off. He checked that Mitzy was still following them.

"Can you stay with someone? Relative, maybe?"

"I… I could stay with my cousin, maybe? If he'll let me?" Fethry asked, frowning. The secret agent looked back at him for a moment, before he smiled. He had a nice smile. It was a calm one, soothing, like everything would be just fine.

"I think he would," the agent said, and Fethry relaxed into his seat.

Later, after answering more questions, and more questions, and promising Mitzy wouldn't eat any boats, after he'd been given his room key and more food to eat, someone knocked on his door.

It was the same secret agent as before, holding a small bag.

"Figured you didn't have anything to change into, and I need my jacket back," he said with a grin, and Fethry let him inside.

"Oh, you don't need to do that, my sweater is almost dry!"

"Fethry. Take the clothes."

Fethry took the bag. It had two long sleeved shirts in it, both red. They weren't sweaters, but he guessed that might be hard to find here. It was very warm.

"Thanks," he answered, then peered at the agent. He wasn't wearing his tie anymore, and his feathers were ruffled like he'd run his fingers through them a bunch.

The secret agent sighed, rubbed his face.

"I'm sorry you got caught up in this," he said quietly. "You should head to Duckburg and see- your cousins."

Right! Della lived there too, he could see them both! That would be

nice. Plus the mini-Donalds!

"I will. I gave them- um, I gave them Donald's number. Since he's the cousin I would be going to see. Is that- was that right?"

The secret agent eyed him, frowning.

"You're not going to see Gladstone?" he asked. "He's living there too."

Fethry blinked.

Donald blinked back. But he was still doing the weird voice thing, didn't that mean he was still a spy? Why would a secret agent guy know about Gladstone?

"Are you Donald now?" Fethry asked, tilting his head. "I thought you were still Agent Dee."

Donald blinked again, before a startled laugh came out of his beak.

"You- of course you got it right away," he said, still laughing, and he reached up to his neck to take something off. A white choker thing, which had been hidden by his feathers.

"I'm just Donald right now," he confirmed, and *that* was back to normal, good. Fethry thought the other voice thing was cool, but this was Donald's voice. He liked it a lot better than the smooth spy one. Even if his spy thing was cool.

“Okay! In that case, tell me about Gladstone! When did he move?” Fethry demanded, hopping up to lean close to Donald’s face. Donald grinned back at him.

“It’s been a while! He built a house on the beach, it’s nice, you’ll like it. And! There’s room for you and Mitzy to stay there!” Donald told him cheerfully. “My boat is on the dock too, and it’s just down the hill from the manor, you’ll be able to see everyone.”

That sounded- that sounded nice. Fethry couldn’t remember the last time they’d all *lived* near each other. Probably not since they were kids, and that was a long time ago.

“Oh, and, well, you wouldn’t have heard yet, but um- I’m having a baby,” Donald said, and his smile went all wobbly. “With Panchito and José, you’ve met them. So. There’s that.”

“Another mini Donald?!” Fethry shouted, too loud, too too loud, but Donald laughed and grinned and nodded, and Fethry tackled him in a hug. They both fell onto the bed with a thump.

“That’s so exciting! I want to meet them, can I meet them?!”

“Soon! They haven’t hatched yet, Fethry, they’re just an egg right now!”

“I want to meet the egg!”

“You’ll have to get to Duckburg to do that!”

Fethry nodded. He was going to do that. He was *so* going to do that.

In the morning. Mitzy needed some rest. And so did he.

“So… the agent thing…” Fethry said later, after they’d eaten and Donald had taken his jacket back. He looked different with it on. Professional. Serious. Super cool, Fethry was jealous. He always looked like a waiter when he wore a suit.

“It’s a secret,” Donald replied immediately. “Please don’t- it’s a secret.”

Fethry nodded. He was good with secrets.

“You can tell Gladstone, if you want to talk to someone,” Donald said after a moment. “He knows already.”

Oh, that was good. Donald needed people to talk to. Gladstone was good to talk to, sometimes, if he stayed to listen. He used to sit with Fethry when they were little, and he would just listen to Fethry talk and talk and talk, until his words dried up and he could breath instead, and Gladstone would just hum and smile.

Donald needed someone like that.

Donald told him good night, and apologized, because he couldn’t see him off in the morning, probably. He had spy stuff to do.

Donald was the *coolest* cousin Fethry had.

Fethry's journey back to Duckburg was fast. Because Mitzy was amazing, and also wanted to go back there; apparently she had made friends with some sharks wearing parkas and was excited to see them again.

It still took a few days, but that was fast when you weren't racing to save the world! Donald had told him to make sure to eat and sleep, so they did.

He followed Donald's instructions carefully; he'd drawn him a map, on cool waterproof spy paper that he had found! And it said to follow the coast until he found a little carved out spot. Which looked super interesting, Fethry wondered what kind of fish lived in this inlet cause it was super unique.

And there was Donald's houseboat, bobbing in the water. It looked empty, which made sense, cause Donald wasn't there.

The little house on the beach had lights on though! And- now it had a Gladstone on the porch, running towards him!

Wait. Gladstone *running*? Was there something wrong? Fethry looked around, but there was nothing around. Maybe if he got down from Mitzy he'd be able to see-

Oh. Apparently Gladstone was running to hug him.

Fethry clutched him back, reveling in the smell of Gladstone's fancy

cologne and how soft his feathers were.

"Fethry! Donald said- he said you were on your way up here, it's great to see you! Come on, lemme show you the house, is Mitzy alright here? We can make her a nicer spot if she needs more room-" Gladstone babbled, which was more Fethry's thing, that was weird, and started tugging Fethry up the beach to the house.

It was small, and beachy, and there was a big cleared space next to it that looked like-

"You built a garden!" Fethry shouted, pointing. Gladstone nodded.

"I did!"

"It looks great!"

"Thanks!"

The house was nice. It had a lot of green rooms, or green decorative stuff, and plants and things all over the place. There were some books too, mostly romances; Gladstone loved reading happy endings, Fethry remembered.

"So Donald didn't say why you were coming? Or, well, *how* he ran into you," Gladstone said later, when they were sitting on the porch. "We just got back here this morning, actually, so it was good timing."

"Lucky timing," Fethry replied, just to make Gladstone laugh, before

he shrugged. “He was doing a thing in Costa Rica and I found a body he needed! Or, a body Agent Dee needed. And a boat. Something about a blot?”

Gladstone blinked at him

“He told you that?”

“He said you know too!” Fethry said brightly. “And I mostly overheard things. Did you know he has a cool voice changer thing?”

Gladstone nodded slowly, sipping at his fancy drink; he’d put a little umbrella in it.

“Yeah, we ran into each other at a party, he was wearing it then too.”

“That’s cool! What kind of party?”

“Uh, well for me it was a fancy party with lots of people and music and whatnot,” Gladstone said absently. “I have no idea what he was doing there, we didn’t really talk about that part.”

Huh. Probably because it was a spy secret. Fethry nodded seriously.

“Is- was he okay?” Glad asked, looking back at Fethry.

“He seemed fine. Tired, for sure. He made me eat and gave me his jacket the minute he saw me,” Fethry revealed with a laugh. “Classic

Donald, right?”

Gladstone snorted.

“I don’t think he can help himself,” he replied, chortling. “He rescued me from an- an awkward situation at the party too. Didn’t even blink.”

That was their cousin, Fethry thought with a smile. Always the hero. Always helping people, even when he acted grumpy about it, even when he got hurt- always helping. Sometimes he even did it when he shouldn’t, when he was supposed to keep things a secret.

But that was okay. Fethry was good at keeping secrets.

New Apprentice: Acquired

The body was Alvarez. That wasn't terribly shocking, really, they'd been expecting it. Time of death: approximately the same day after Acosta had been found, though the water had made a more exact timeframe impossible.

The boat had clearly been scuttled; holes like the ones they had found in the hull didn't happen from hitting the rocks, they'd been done intentionally from the inside. Whether Alvarez had been alive at the time was unclear, as his exact cause of death still couldn't be determined.

Acosta's body was still being looked at, but that was more to try and verify how long he could have been frozen. Donald didn't know if that was even possible, but Vee was tentatively hopeful they could get at least a date range, so he left her to it.

The bigger issue was determining who had been pretending to *be* Acosta.

Actually, no, that was the secondary issue related to the much bigger one: the entire staff had *vanished,* leaving no witnesses to question about who exactly had been living in the villa this whole time. Alvarez? Someone pretending to be Acosta? Had anyone been here at *all,* or was this an elaborate cover up?

They were still searching the staff homes, but apparently they were *gone* gone. Apartments empty, houses abandoned, or the address was just plain wrong and they'd never lived there at all. The consistency caught Donald's attention; surely if they'd been bribed at least *one* of them would have stuck around? Had family in the area? Friends, a lover?

But no, nothing. They were all ghosts. And the quick turnover took on a grisly tone in his mind. Had those people left for other jobs, or had they been removed for lack of cooperation?

Del Mar and Hernandez were more than happy to have SHUSH step in and offer assistance in searching for more information; they'd been overwhelmed by the single murder, and this was fast turning into the kind of conspiracy that could make or break a career. Hernandez told them bluntly they could do whatever they wanted, but he wanted a name to blame and the only microphone at the eventual news broadcast.

Donald had agreed without a thought, and got Ravenson's simple email confirmation later. They weren't here for *fame,* after all.

C4 was about ready to lay an egg at his beautiful, complex itinerary being all but useless now; apparently he hadn't considered a giant mutated krill finding Alvarez and had no plan to handle it. He had, very seriously, declared he would fly down and take over handling of the investigation as it had become a more involved process and Donald was only supposed to take short field commands.

Petty, certainly, but it meant Donald could get back to Duckburg sooner rather than later.

330 seemed surprised by the change, and even more so by Donald's willingness to take it.

"We just found concrete evidence of the Blot here, and you're alright with leaving *now?"* He demanded the moment they got back to their hotel room, with C4's arrival imminent.

Donald shrugged, exhausted.

“This isn’t the kind of investigation I’m suited for,” he replied. “We need a bigger team to search for the missing staff members, we need more forensic experts to look at the bodies and try to make sense of the timeline, and that takes a different kind of skill set than the one I have.”

“And what *do* you have?” 330 asked, which was much sharper than Donald would have expected.

“My missions are fast ones, 330. If the building doesn’t explode before I leave I consider it a quiet day,” he retorted. “The only reason we were assigned the Blot/FOWL mission was because we were expected to move fast and break things. This is not that.”

“So you’re willing to step aside because it’s not your area of expertise?”

“When there are others available who *are* experts in this? *Yes.”*

“But we could-”

“330, we work as a team. That means handing things to the best people available to handle them,” Donald said tiredly. “Which isn’t me, right now. *You* are free to stay and continue working this case, you'll do well if you do, but Ravenson already confirmed my departure. It’s done.”

330 was silent for a moment, stewing. Then-

“It feels like giving up,” he admitted, slumping onto the bed. Donald sighed, nodded

“Believe me,” Donald stressed, “I know better than most how hard it is to hand over something like this. You feel like you can give more, do more. But trust me, you *will* burn yourself out if you can’t delegate. You’re young, you’re still finding out what your strengths are, so take my advice: if you know someone else could do better, don’t insist on doing it yourself just for the sake of doing it.”

“SHUSH is short handed,” 330 muttered. “Everyone knows it, that’s why so many retired agents have been called back in. We don’t have the extra people to spare.”

Were there any agents besides Donald and Bentina that had come back? He supposed them both being at the same site might have drawn attention…

“Which is why I’m helping train people,” Donald reminded him. “Which is half the reason I’m being reassigned back to Duckburg. The trainees are nearly ready to start up, and they want me ready to go, not here working a manhunt.”

330 still looked mulish.

“That tree person. The- the dryad-” he said slowly. “We can’t just- she deserves as much justice as Acosta or Alvarez. More. And you’re the only one that really seems to care. It just feels like we’re abandoning her.”

“We’re not,” Donald replied immediately. “Don’t think for a second I’m going to give up on the Blot just because I’m not here.”

In the early morning, Donald and 330, who refused to let him go alone, slipped back out to the villa. It was a madhouse, even now, but the small mangrove area was untouched.

“It’s fairly normal for dryad groves to be hard to find,” Donald revealed quietly. “They give off a natural deterrent.”

“It wasn’t enough to save her, though,” 330 replied, just as softly.

“No. It isn’t enough to dissuade someone that *knows* there’s something there.”

There were small flowers planted in some of the high points, now. Tiny golden hibiscus, with the soil around them clearly very recently disturbed.

It looked like Yellow had brought flowers after all.

He hopped across to the face, but the bark had gone soft and mushy in the last few days of heavy cloud cover and mist, leaving only the faintest impression of eyes and a nose.

“Is that normal?” 330 asked. Donald started to nod his head, then shrugged.

“To be honest, I don’t know. Usually dryads decay fast when they die, but the Blot’s weapons threw that out the window. This seems to be back to normal, but I don’t really know,” he said honestly.

He looked at the center split of the original trunk. There was already a foot-tall sapling there, with a handful of bright green leaves reaching for the light. *That* was more unusual, but he couldn't see how it could be a bad thing.

Gently, he reached out, with just the faintest brush of magic, against the outer edges of the leaves.

A hand reached out and grasped him back *tight,* joined by a second one. Wispy things, more air than solid, but their fingers were strong. They clutched at him, not dragging or hurting, but with a desperate fervor that made him gasp.

Thank you.

It repeated in his mind, whispering in the sound of lapping waves and rustling leaves in the breeze, the taste of salt and fresh *green* on his tongue.

Thank you!

The leaves of the sapling turned to face him, fluttering like a wave.

I feel so different! Like a brand new thing! My roots are cold *and they reach so much farther than before. The water tastes salty! I get to taste again! I will live to see the next sunset!*

A wiggle under his feet, the giant root shifting just enough to tell him it *could.*

You will, he swore. *You will see many more sunsets, and rises, and storms and birdsong in the leaves.*

A giggle, and then it went quiet, and the hands grasping his let go.

“Uh, DD? You’ve got something on your hands,” 330 said, from where he stood a few feet away. Donald opened his eyes and looked down.

Where he had felt the touch, there were streaks of green, like he’d tumbled into fresh-cut grass.

“She was happy to see me,” he said, and he stepped back. The sapling’s leaves pointed to the sky, and a few clouds cleared to light it up with a glow.

“The- oh, there’s a new tree! That’s, um, would that be her daughter…?” 330 asked, peering at her with a fascinated expression. Donald pursed his lips.

“I don’t really know,” he repeated carefully, because it had occurred to him that he had effectively brought her back to life, and he didn’t think 330 needed to know he’d technically done some kind of oceanic necromancy.

He was going to have to remember that 330 knew about that now. Keeping track of who knew what was becoming more and more of a hassle.

He also had to wonder- could he do it again? As far as he knew no

magical creatures that the Blot had attacked had survived, but if he found another, was this possible? And what would they even be afterwards? He wasn't a botany expert, but he was pretty sure that she hadn't been a mangrove *before* Donald got here.

There was also the question of the mortal Blot victims; the average mages and witches. They didn't have any magic to *replace,* but if he tried to give them some anyway, smooth the edges of the wound and try to put something back, what *would* happen?

He had to assume that they wouldn't remain *mortal,* though he didn't know what exactly would be on the other end of that. Even he wasn't interested in that kind of experimentation, burning scars from the Blot or not.

"DD, how did you find her?" 330 asked, when they had stepped back onto the path. "I mean- you said you just stumbled onto her, but you also said dryads are usually hard to find…?"

"A living one is," Donald replied. "But she- you didn't see how this looked before I got here. This area? Was all dead and not rotting. Just going straight to ash. I could sense it, but honestly, even seeing it was- it was obvious something was wrong."

330 was quiet for a moment.

"But what if we've missed other victims," he finally whispered. "What if- this one was obvious, and apparently the theatre the Blot was hiding in felt weird, but- but what SHUSH has been around other victims and didn't know it? We could have missed evidence!"

"330," Donald started, before he sighed, feeling the weight settle on his back. "I've been to every single Blot location so far. If anyone was

going to notice it would be me."

"But you're leaving," 330 pointed out. "You *can't* be everywhere, and nobody else here has that ability, do they?"

330's jaw twisted, then, like he'd tasted something unpleasant.

"You're the one saying that you should pass things along to the most qualified person, when you have the opportunity," he observed. Donald winced, already seeing where this was going. "But if *you're* the expert, you're just going to end up with everything being handed to you!"

"I-"

"Teach me."

"What?"

"Teach me. Whatever it is- I don't need to be a wizard, or anything, but if I could tell what I was looking for, that's- it's one more person that's available, right?"

Donald stopped moving entirely. Stared.

"This isn't something you pick up on overnight," he pointed out.

"But I could pick up on enough to sense whatever it was that

Paperinik was talking about at the theatre," 330 countered.

"Paperinik talked about *mold,"* Donald countered. "And ghosts."

He prayed that those reports were already somewhere, because for the life of him he couldn't remember if Double Duck was supposed to know about the ghosts.

"So teach me to be able to find that mold! … or ghosts. Was he serious about ghosts?"

"It was a *theatre."* Donald huffed. "They're all haunted."

330 paused, blinking at him in confusion, before he seemed to shake off whatever he was thinking and peering at Donald with a pleading expression.

Donald was a grown man. He had raised *triplets* and been an uncle to dozens more. 330 was young, sure, but *also* a grown adult. Those eyes would *not* work.

They should not work.

Phooey.

"Fine," Donald grumbled, already regretting it. "I will *try,* with the caveat that it will not be fast, you're likely to be more confused than you were before, and I am *not* a standard teacher. When we're both back in Duckburg I'll figure something out."

330 beamed. Then laughed.

"Guess I'm never going to entirely graduate from your class," he snorted. "Am I?"

Donald managed a chuckle.

"Trust me," he replied, shaking his head. "You're never done learning. Just hope it's from a teacher and not experience."

He was *supposed* to meet C4 at the hotel, touch base about the mission before Donald left, and fly home to apparently plan magic lessons for two different people on top of the rest of his responsibilities.

Supposed to, because he had missed his flight now, and would have to rebook it.

If he survived the firefight they were currently locked in, pinned down by flying bullets, the hotel lobby with all the staff having fled already. Donald hoped they were safe.

He hoped they weren't in on it.

Their attackers hadn't announced themselves, but the egghead helmets didn't require an introduction. FOWL was apparently very interested in nobody finding out what happened here.

Stupid choice; not only did this make absolutely sure SHUSH would continue investigating, it would also ensure the locals would have every reason to think that SHUSH *should* be looking into things.

Well, it might be enough to make them want SHUSH to leave so they could quietly drop the case, but-

Donald ducked, watching the wall behind him take on another few holes, plaster and tile shattering and filling the air with dust.

But his best theory was that they were hoping to destroy the evidence they had, and anyone who would be aware it was missing.

Which meant that the *evidence* they had was the most important thing, and from that, Donald assumed it was one of the bodies. Alvarez made more sense, since they had actively tried to hide that one-

He peered above the counter; he could see three Egghead helmets from here.

Lucky for him, he hadn't finished packing. Which meant he was still armed.

He took the shot. Ducked. Took the next two. Ducked down again and waited.

One breath.

Two.

In.

Out.

He dove for another shelter as a grenade landed in the space he'd just been in. The explosion set his ears ringing, but they were already fucked to hell and back, so one more grenade probably wouldn't do too much damage.

His new shelter was an upturned table, where Yellow was already pinned down, but he didn't pause there, hoping that they wouldn't see her if he kept moving to another table.

Alvarez's body didn't seem to be hiding anything besides a possible timeline of events, but they hadn't completed an autopsy yet, so there *could* be something there. But Donald was more suspicious of Acosta's body, given it had been *frozen.* Maybe-

Another shot rang out, and something whipped past his cheek. He shot backwards without looking, diving back for cover. He heard a gurgle.

Too close that time.

-maybe they hadn't expected anyone to realize the body had been frozen, and wanted to keep them from learning anything else. *That* was the most intriguing part of this. The staff disappearing implied they'd all been faking seeing him around the property, but they could easily have faked a drowning; why a *murder?*

Was Alvarez still a possible patsy? Maybe they'd hoped to frame him?

Donald heard a crack behind him, and whipped around, but it was C4, rolling into the space Donald was; he had to shuffle to the side before he was shoved out of it.

C4 looked disgruntled to find his cover already occupied.

"Do you think they're trying to attack the morgue?" Donald asked conversationally, as another small explosion rocked the lobby.

"What?!"

"The morgue. I think they're pissed we found out Acosta was frozen-"

"Are you seriously thinking about this *now?"* C4 demanded, eyes wild. He shot something over the top of the table.

When else would he think about it?

Donald shrugged the question off, leaned to the side, and shot out three sets of kneecaps. The room went quiet. Besides a few groans and whimpers, anyway.

People were so *sensitive* about their knees. Everyone always thought about aiming for the head, or the chest for a larger target, which was why people got bullet-proof vests for the latter and- well, there really

wasn’t much to be done for the former.

But so few people were really prepared for the pain of losing their knee. And it meant he could leave them alive for questioning.

Guess he wasn’t leaving this mission after all.

Four Eggs

“So… clones.” Donald said into the air.

Nobody responded to him. That was fine, he wasn’t talking to them anyway.

He couldn’t say he was surprised. He already knew FOWL experimented with cloning on occasion, that was how he’d met the Warners after all, but it *was* a surprise that every one of their Egghead prisoners were clearly identical when the helmets were removed.

It was equally surprising to realize that if you happened to slap a red-haired wig on one of them, they would *also* be identical to the still-missing Mme Rouge. Except these ones, for some strange reason, didn't have that same forgettable vibe. He could pick out minute features to focus on, if he wanted. Freckles, tiny scars, the shape of the eyes and the color of the beak. The same could *not* be said for Mme Rouge.

Donald had looked over the helmets after that. None were cracked, beyond the new ones that matched the bullets from the short firefight.

So they were not, apparently, the one they were looking for.

Interesting, interesting.

“Clones,” Donald repeated, still not talking to anyone else in the room. “Which I’m guessing your bosses didn’t want us to know about. Might make us start wondering how many of you they’ve managed to create.”

The four survivors were sitting watching him, beaks clamped shut, posture nearly identical. If not for the varying injuries, they would be hard to tell apart.

“Alright, I’m not calling you Eggheads forever; names, please.” Donald ordered, finally turning to look at them directly. Behind him, Yellow was bandaging up C4’s leg, which had taken a hit at some point. She was quiet. The rest of their team hadn’t been in the building, and any of the staff or other guests had clearly fled when guns had showed up.

Unusual for FOWL to use normal guns. They preferred more distinct weapons; blasters, lasers, things that would say *FOWL* and nobody else. A calling card.

The lack of one pointed in an interesting direction indeed; FOWL hadn’t wanted them to know they were involved. Regular guns could have belonged to any of the people from the auction or Acosta’s other potential dealings, which would have muddied the waters on who wanted him dead. So long as the Eggheads didn't leave any witnesses, anyway.

Should probably have left their helmets elsewhere for complete anonymity. Ah well.

Silence. Donald sighed, pointed at the first in the row.

“What’s your name?” He demanded. The Egghead stared back blankly.

“I’m not calling you ‘Head Wound’ all day,” Donald continued, looking at the one that did, in fact, have bandages around their head. “Name. Or at least designation.”

That, apparently, was acceptable, as Head Wound perked up.

"I'm EG 45211," they replied immediately, spine straightening briefly before they slumped again, rubbing at their ribs. Bruised, probably.

"Alright," Donald said, even though that code was barely more helpful than 'Head Wound' had been, "EG 45211. Want to tell me what you were supposed to be doing here?"

Their face went sour, scowling.

"I'm not- I won't betray FOWL," they snapped, huddling closer to their colleagues. Siblings?

"Might as well," Donald said blandly. "FOWL isn't likely to care one way or the other."

"That isn't true!"

"No? What will they do when they find out you failed your mission?" Donald asked. Four blank faces. "Even if you *do* keep quiet, what's the standard treatment for failure?"

"We would be decommissioned," EG 45211 finally answered. Their expression was cold. Emotionless. Far too accepting of that reality, in Donald's opinion.

“And what do you think *we’re* going to do to you?” He asked curiously, looking at the lineup. They all watched him warily; none of them even glanced at the other agents around them, still picking themselves up and calling in backup to handle prisoner intake and cleanup. They were going to have to book a new hotel, Donald realized with a muffled chuckle.

“You’ll decommission us?” One of the other Eggheads guessed, rearing back when Donald turned to look at them directly.

“Name?” He asked. The Egghead frowned.

“We don’t have names yet,” they said, before adding “Sir?” Like they weren’t sure if that was right.

“Don’t have- what, FOWL *only* gave you a designation?” He demanded, staring at the line in front of him. They all nodded, slowly, like they didn’t understand what *he* wasn’t getting.

“We earn names by doing well in the field,” A third one explained, looking pleased to be able to explain something. “Just like SHUSH agents!”

Donald blinked.

“You… you do know agents *have* names, don’t you?” He asked. “We don’t use them in the field, but we all have normal names.”

The Eggheads glanced at each other, then back at him.

“But you’re Double Duck,” 45211 stressed, “You *earned* that name!”

“Yeah, that’s one way of looking at it,” Donald admitted, feeling remarkably off-kilter, “But my parents gave me a real one when I was born; Double Duck is just what my code name is while I’m working.”

They all stared at each other for a moment, before Donald shook his head.

“Back on topic,” he said, more to himself than the- fuck, they didn’t even have *names*- “Here’s what SHUSH *actually* does, and no, it isn’t decommissioning people. You decommission a piece of equipment, not a person- we’re going to ask you questions. Lots of them. Then we’ll decide what to do with you. Don’t answer, things, and that’ll probably be a private prison where FOWL can’t get to you. Help us out, and prison might be negotiable for something with a bit more freedom. Understand?”

To another person, private prison would be a threat, a complete cut-off from the world and any of their friends or loved ones. A hole to rot in, even if they were treated perfectly well.

To these Eggheads? He might have just described paradise.

“You won’t- FOWL won’t be able to find us?” 45211 asked, frowning. Donald nodded.

“They won’t risk you talking, so we can’t let them near you,” he explained. “And the first thing I’m going to make sure you have is a names book. Forget this earning thing, you can pick whatever name you want. FOWL doesn’t get to keep that from you.”

“DD! A moment?” C4 called from further into the room. Donald sighed.

“You think about your options,” he said to the group, waiting until Yellow caught his eye and nodded to confirm she was watching them, then walking to where C4 was sitting.

C4 looked constipated.

“I thought the rumors about your missions were exaggerations,” he groaned when Donald got close. Donald shrugged.

“Some say it’s a gift,” he replied cheerfully, uncertain what rumors there were anyway; most of his missions went sideways at first contact. It was why he rarely made a concrete plan in the first place.

C4 grunted, shaking his head.

“What’ve you got so far from the Eggheads?” He asked, glancing at their prisoners. They were still watching him, not even looking at Yellow.

“They don’t even have *names,”* Donald said immediately, the horror of it settling in his gut. “They don’t- FOWL tells them they only get a name when they’ve *earned* it.”

C4 frowned.

“That’s it?” he asked, looking back at the four.

“That’s- C4, they have no sense of identity. They’re convinced we’re going to *decommission* them. Not kill, decommission, like a bad motor,” Donald stressed. “It’s how FOWL would punish them for failing.”

C4’s face was blank; Donald realized he either didn’t understand it, or didn’t *care,* and took a breath. In. out. Until his heart rate slowed to something more normal.

“It gives us an opportunity here,” he said cautiously. “If we can earn their trust by *not* killing them, they’re more likely to talk. We just need to treat them like people.”

“Wasn’t planning on anything else,” C4 replied. Donald shook his head.

“You’d be surprised. SHUSH really isn’t a fan of Eggheads.”

They got everything transferred to an actual SHUSH base, the local investigators offering to work as support and backup, but largely handing the case over to SHUSH entirely. Del Mar looked irritated about it, when Donald went to copy over the last of the files, but Hernandez insisted they wanted nothing to do with it after the shooting.

“We’re here to deal with our own people, not international messes,” he’d grumbled as he signed some paperwork confirming SHUSH had open access to anything they needed. “Clean it up and let me tell my people they’re safe, that’s all I care about. This is no longer my jurisdiction.”

The base they were now set up at was clearly understaffed, and the building was in need of some maintenance. The Eggheads looked nervous as they were settled into their containment cells; four rooms with minimal privacy, but close enough that they could talk to each other through the cell doors.

C4 had protested; Donald had threatened to override him.

“Standard protocol is *separating* enemy prisoners, DD, we can’t just ignore that because you’re feeling sympathetic!”

“Standard procedure is for standard situations, and this *isn’t one.”* Donald snarled. “Separating them is to keep them from colluding and to make them paranoid about what’s happening to their team. We want them to *trust* us, splitting them up will do the opposite!”

C4 finally backed down, though Donald was fairly sure it was because he pointed out that *he,* not C4, had handled extractions and double agents before, and C4 had not. The guy was a stickler for things like that.

He sat down with the Eggheads, who were still nervous whenever an agent came by, even just to offer food.

“We can’t get you electronics, security protocols won’t allow it, but I can put in a request for books or a deck of cards,” Donald offered. They continued to stare. “Nothing that could easily be made into a weapon, you understand.”

“I could kill someone with a book,” 45211 said. They seemed to be the spokesman of the group, though Donald wasn’t sure if that was a

ranking thing or not.

“Sure, but it wouldn’t be easy. And we *would* have to take action if you tried to kill someone,” Donald said easily. He didn’t think they wanted to kill anyone. He was actually staking some of his reputation on it, considering he was sitting in a room with them. It would be somewhat embarrassing if he was attacked here.

“Would *that* get us decommissioned?” Another one asked; they were the one with the broken arm, and hadn’t offered up their designation at any point.

“If we had to do it to protect someone, probably. If we were able to subdue you, no, but it would mean you lose your book privileges. And I imagine you’ll get pretty bored.”

“We don’t need anything.” This was from the fourth Egghead, who hadn’t spoken much thus far. Had been utterly silent the entire transport to the base, in fact.

“This isn’t a need situation,” Donald said carefully. “This is a want. *We* want you to help us. *You* want to not be decommissioned. And *I* want you to not go insane from staring at the walls.”

They agreed to the books, in the end. He was pretty sure it was because he’d insisted, not out of genuine interest, but there wasn’t much else to do in one of these cells, and they couldn’t be allowed out of said cells yet. Maybe if they talked.

C4 was fuming that Donald wasn't pushing hard on them. Donald was close to screaming at him; it had already been two days since he was supposed to *leave,* but if he did, how would he know that they hadn’t switched strategies?

He called Scrooge on the second extra night.

“Donald! Lad, you said you’d be home already!” Scrooge answered the phone with his usual energy. Donald sighed. He’d only intended to check in and confirm everything was alright before calling Panchito.

“Yeah, something came up- everything’s complicated, and I can’t trust *anyone* not to-” he cut himself off, groaning. Scrooge didn’t know what was happening, he reminded himself. Scrooge didn’t know the details.

“What’s going on down there?”

“Nothing, it’s- it’s nothing, don’t worry about it.”

“Now there’s no need for that. Go on, you can talk for a bit,” Scrooge said after a moment.

“Who are you and what have you done with my uncle?” Donald grumbled. Scrooge scoffed.

“I’m perfectly capable of listening to you vent about work for a few minutes,” he retorted. “I’ll just sit here quietly, you can shout about things. Get some of it off your chest.”

Donald shouldn’t. He really, really shouldn’t.

“Well, our guy’s assistant is also dead,” he found himself saying.

“Entire staff went to ground, they're gone. And somehow that isn’t the worst part of everything.”

Scrooge was, as he’d promised, was silent, as Donald complained about C4, who he nicknamed Clyde again, kept trying to pull rank and insist on such specific plans when every single one of them had fallen apart.

“-and I am *this* close to just punching him!” Donald wrapped up with a huff, falling backwards on his bed and thanking the universe at large that SHUSH had soundproofed rooms on base. “If we followed his plan we wouldn’t have any information and I probably would have gotten shot earlier-”

“Shot?!”

Phooey. Donald groaned, eyes falling shut. He hadn’t meant to say that.

“Donald, what exactly are you mixed up in?” Scrooge demanded.

He *really* hadn’t meant to say that.

“Scrooge, I’m fine,” he muttered. “I told you the guy and his assistant were dead; whoever did it isn’t pleased anyone is looking into it.”

“You’re supposed to be looking into his *paperwork,* not the murders,” Scrooge insisted. “You shouldn’t be in that kind of danger!”

“I’m a big boy, I can handle a few bullets,” Donald huffed. “We’ve faced worse on a fun weekend trip.”

Well. Fun for Scrooge and Della, anyway.

Okay, he *did* sometimes enjoy those trips *before* the bullets started flying, but-

“That’s different! You’re with family on those adventures, we can protect each other!”

That was a hoot. How many times had Donald taken a hit that was meant for someone else? Especially the family who was supposed to be watching his back.

There was a long silence. Donald forced his eyes back open.

“I’m fine,” he forced out. “I am perfectly capable of defending myself, and I don’t need anyone else to watch my back right now. I just need Clyde to stop being an idiot. I’ll be home- I don’t know. Whenever we can get this mess cleaned up, I guess.”

“Donald-”

“Good night.”

He hung up. He felt like he’d eaten lead.

He ended up texting Panchito and José with a brief update and a request for some photos of the egg to keep him sane, then fell asleep before he got a response.

Donald woke to a half-dead phone with dozens of new photos of the egg, Panchito, José, the two *with* the egg, the kids (who all looked like they had just woken up, all ruffled feathers and sleepy smiles), the *kids* with the egg-

It was enough to make him smile as he headed down to the mess halls, where he saw the remains of the team already eating; Vee and K83 looked exhausted; they'd joined a team that was now scouring every inch of the lands around the villa for any signs of other burials or deaths, including underwater searches, and they probably had only just gotten in. Donald murmured a command that they go sleep as soon as they'd finished eating, before moving on.

Yellow and G17 were more awake; they'd ridden in with him and the Eggheads.

"Anything from our new guests?" G17 asked. He hadn't been overly pleased they were keeping them around, Donald recalled.

"No, but I'm heading back down today," Donald replied, rubbing his eyes.

"What's your angle on that, anyway? You'd think surviving at all would be enough of a carrot to start talking," Yellow asked. Donald shrugged.

"They have to believe that they *will* survive, and right now they

don't."

Yellow hummed. G17 continued to eat.

"Can't imagine being born into FOWL," Yellow finally mused. "Probably not the warmest place to grow up."

"How *did* they grow up," G17 muttered into his coffee. "They all look to be in their twenties, did FOWL really have the resources for cloning that far back?"

"Might be artificially aged up," Donald suggested. "There's some tech for that, but last I heard of it it was really unstable if you tried to bypass puberty."

"Unstable how?" Yellow asked, perking up.

"Behavior issues, and I mean go 'completely insane and start attacking everything they could see' level of issues. Chronic medical issues, growth problems where the body didn't really mature at the same rate, so you'd have an adult sized head on a child's body- things like that."

"Oh, well, if it's just *that,"* Yellow snorted a laugh. "So, you thinking they've fixed those issues?"

"That's my guess," Donald confirmed. "That would explain why we're seeing them so active so *fast,* when nobody can find signs of them out recruiting."

“Hmm. Comforting line of thought. On that note, we’ve got a meeting with Intel. And someone told me to tell you, they’re sending a Doctor Perkins down here, he wants to examine the dryad body.”

“It’s almost entirely rotted away by now,” Donald protested.

“Yeah, I mentioned that, he wants to see it anyway. At least we have pictures to compare to, right?” Yellow said with a shrug.

Great. He’d have to supervise that.

“Right,” he replied, distracted.

“Oh, and Timely was looking for you, he was heading for the gym.”

“Timely?”

“330. Thought he’d earned it after yet another Blot finding on his *second* mission; he always seems to be in the right place at the right time,” Yellow explained with a grin. Donald felt an answering one on his own face.

“Well, guess I’ll go find him and offer congrats on earning a nickname,” he said, feeling lighter, and forced the coffee down.

Interlude: Webby and the Donald Duck Secrets Society

Chapter Notes

> Hello everyone! No, don't check your calendar, it's still Thursday! I'm going to be out of town, so you get this chapter early :D
>
> Next week might be late, but that! Is next week's problem. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“How did I meet your uncle? Oh, it was at the *Jazz Singer,* though I think it was called *Mimzy’s* back then, it’s changed hands a few times. I had just turned eighteen, and Donna, that’s my sister, she wanted to go out to celebrate. I saw Donald across the room and oh- I can’t call it love at first sight, but it was a very romantic moment! The lights, the music…”

A dreamy sigh.

“Then I saw he was *with* someone, and I was ready to let him go, but Donna thought we ought to take a closer peek; we got closer, and that’s when his date waved us down to join them. Turned out to be his grandma Elvira! He’d taken her out for a night on the town. I thought he was the sweetest man I’d ever met, though we were only kids at the time, really…”

“Well, your great-gran had an eye for matchmaking, I think, because she started playing up how she was tired and wanted a rest, but *insisted* we ought to enjoy the night some more, so we danced together until- well, very late! Donna was fit to be tied, she had arraignments in the morning, but I was floating on air!”

A chuckle.

“Of course, he was shipping out for the Navy shortly after that. We decided to exchange letters; I thought it was the most romantic thing ever, sending letters abroad and getting them back from all corners of the globe… ohhhh no! I can send you copies of my photos and videos, but those letters are a bit too private to share!”

“Anyway, we dated when he got back, but- well, I’m sure he’s told you some of it, but we really weren’t good for each other. Got along like a house on fire, people said, but, well, that wasn’t really a good thing. We made each other happy, sometimes. But we made each other *angry,* just as often. Not a good basis for a relationship; we’re better off as friends.”

“When was that? Let me think…”

Webby carefully finished her transcript, noting the date and time, as well as the dates Daisy had been able to remember. She’d been full of helpful information for the timeline; when Uncle Donald had been in the Navy, some of the places he’d sent letters from, when he’d gotten back; she even knew when he’d met José and Panchito!

Which was great, because none of them could decide if asking them counted as rule breaking or not. Huey said no, because the rules had *only* been written for Uncle Donald directly, but Louie and Lena both thought them all living together meant that his partners might ask Uncle Donald themselves and *that* would be basically the same thing.

Personally, Webby thought it would have been fine, but since nobody could agree, they weren’t asking; which meant her getting info about New Quackmore from Daisy was a perfect workaround.

Pleased, she pulled down the evidence board to add her file.

The board was a mess right now, each team's colored strings reaching here and there until it was a mess to look at. Webby wanted to fix it, rearrange and clean up things, but there was so much to *add* that there didn't seem to be time.

She added Daisy's info, squinting at the openings beneath her name for the triplets; apparently she had triplet nieces that Uncle Donald was close with, but they hadn't been able to get in contact with *any* of them. Which was really messing with their ability to fill in the New Quackmore timeline! Huey had found a local newspaper that said there was some kind of magic fight on campus, but Daisy didn't remember it when Webby had pushed, so they needed another witness.

She knew Huey was trying to talk to some of the curators at the Donald Duck wing of the history displays, and she was super jealous he'd gotten there first, but she was *determined* to fill this part in somehow!

Louie and Lena had already claimed Minnie, plus Dewey had Bugs Bunny telling him about his wedding, so Webby needed to catch her team up!

Though, she didn't really think anyone was competing for points anymore. Now it was proving something. That they knew their uncle. That he wasn't keeping giant secrets for no reason, he just didn't like talking about horrible things that happened to him. And the non-awful stuff was all stuff he *had* talked about, so far! At least little bits of it. So that meant that he wasn't hiding it! He was just- not talking about it, unless someone asked.

Webby glanced at the section of the board with the Paperinik signature (a copy, of course, Boyd was super protective of the original). The article about the Phantom Blot, and the other one

wondering if PK had died, because he hadn't been seen in weeks.

She wondered what it had felt like, having magic and then having it ripped right out of you. Wanted to know all the gory details, how it had hurt and what you did to fix it because if she knew that maybe she could help make it a less awful, horrible story.

The phone dialed once, twice.

"What the *fuck* do you want, Duck?"

Webby flinched, eyes darting around desperately in case Granny had overheard.

"Um, is this… Jo Jo?" She tried, aiming for confident and feeling like she had missed the mark entirely. She usually only talked to family on the phone.

"What- wait, why do you sound like a kid," the woman on the other end asked. "Are you one of Donald's kids or something?"

"Um, yes? Yes, I'm his niece! Sort of, it's kinda complicated," Webby laughed nervously, both hands holding the phone to her ear.

"Always is with him," the woman snorted. "Alright, sort-of-niece, what can I- did you say Jo Jo?"

"Yeah? It's, um, you're in his phone as 'Jo Jo the Red Nosed

Reindeer'."

"That little- alright. No, you can call me Normandy, nobody calls me that, I am going to kill him when I see him next," Jo- Normandy grumbled, but she sounded amused, so maybe it was a friend thing? Or an 'Uncle Donald's friend' thing.

"Okay, Miss Normandy!"

" *Just* Normandy. What's going on, little miss…?"

"I'm Webby! And, um, so I'm calling because we- the boys and I, I mean- we're trying to make a surprise for Uncle Donald!" She reported, praying her lying skills had improved.

"A surprise, huh?"

"Yeah! A scrapbook!" Webby announced, a bit too loudly, need to lower the volume, need to calm down-

"Oh, *that* kind of surprise," Normandy said, sounding pleased. "What kind of scrapbook?"

"Um, anything? The houseboat sank, and… He doesn't have a lot of photos from before the boys hatched, and the ones after that are, well, of the boys," Webby explained, feeling marginally calmer. This was going fine, she told herself. They *were* planning on making a scrapbook, after all.

“Huh. Well, I’ve got plenty from the Navy, I could scrounge some up. Oh, and there are the wedding ones…” Normandy said, mostly to herself, and there was a sound of rustling.

“Wedding?!” Webby shouted, losing her cool for a minute. Oh, *those* would be great! They weren’t of *his* wedding, though, right…? He would have mentioned *that,* right?

“Yeah, he was my Best Man. Did he not mention me?”

Webby pursed her beak. Uncle Donald didn’t mention much of anything, that was the problem! But he did have a *few* pictures lying around and he’d talked about a few things…

“You’re the deer lady in his navy pictures, right? You work with helicopters? He said you’re an O6 but I don’t know what that actually means…” Webby recalled as carefully as she could, sweating. She didn’t want to hurt her feelings by not knowing anything!

“Yup! Wasn’t an O6 back then though, that promotion was a few years ago,” Normandy replied, sounding unbothered. “I think I’ve got a few albums I can pick through, do you have an email for me to send them over to?”

Webby gave her their info, and the Manor’s address for good measure.

“So…” Webby started, trying to imitate Louie’s smooth tone. “Can you tell me any good stories from the Navy? Uncle Donald never tells us any *fun* ones.”

“Oh kid, have I got some *stories* for you.”

She entered ‘Josephine (Normandy) and Liam’s wedding’ to the timeline, apparently smack in the college years after he’d gotten out of the Navy. He’d been so *busy,* the timeline looked crazy- Webby could finally understand why he said he didn’t go on many adventures! He wouldn’t have had the *time!*

The Navy timeline was so blank by comparison, it was kinda funny. But that made total sense! Uncle Donald was working on a ship, so he wouldn’t be doing anything else!

Except for that one weird thing Boyd had found, with the coronation of a Princess where it *looked* like Uncle Donald in the crowd, but that had to be a doppelganger, he was supposed to be in Bangladesh at the time, how would he be in Paris?

Then there was after college, and they really didn’t know what should be there. Aunt Della said that he and his band had gone sailing around the world, so it was probably just José and Panchito stuff, but they didn’t have any clear way of narrowing it down yet.

Webby’s eyes shifted to the boys’ eggs being laid. Uncle Donald returning to Duckburg.

The Spear of Selene.

There was a lot of stuff after that part, but it was all about the triplets, not Uncle Donald. The only thing they knew was he had left the boys with Goofy (and she wanted to call him, but needed to check if Violet had already done that-), and helped with a custody thing with Bugs and the Warners.

Why they were called that, Webby didn't know. Their actual last name was Bunny, same as Bugs.

"Hey Pink, we're here!" Lena called as she popped into the room, Violet at her heels. They were laden with sleeping bags, makeup, snacks, and Violet was carrying an ancient tome that would supposedly let them summon the dead.

All the necessary supplies for an amazing sleepover!

She closed the board; they could update it later.

"So how are your magic lessons going?" Webby demanded, bouncing in place. Lena groaned and flopped backwards onto her pillow.

"Ugh, his lessons are the *worst.* All about doing really simple stuff like floating leaves and making witch lights. It's *boring!"* She whined, but Webby knew Lena, and she could tell it was mostly for show.

"That approach does make sense, when you consider your innate magic works differently than the amulet did," Violet pointed out. "He's building your strength up and forcing you to develop new habits."

"Yeah, the first thing he had me doing when I started dance lessons was the basic stuff!" Webby agreed. "You gotta cover where your feet are supposed to go before you can do flips."

“But I *was* doing flips, and now I’m back to footwork, or whatever your metaphor was,” Lena grumbled, sitting back up, and oh no, her face wasn’t irritated, it was heading somewhere more… embarrassed.

“You were using a different kind of magic, though, so-”

“I know, I know, but I keep thinking- ‘oh, I’ll get the hang of it faster this time!’ and then I can’t even lift a log up. Shouldn’t things click? I’m a magical creature and everything, I feel like this should just make *sense.”*

Webby hopped over to lean against Lena’s side, pressing until Lena huffed and lifted an arm so Webby could settle into a side hug.

“You’ve only been this version of yourself for a few months,” Violet said calmly. “If that had been your birth, you would still be an infant. So I would say any progress at all puts you ahead of the curve of magical creatures. It just seems longer because you’re more aware of time passing.”

“And you’ll get it! You were really good at magic with the amulet, you just need to build up your strength! You kinda switched from a giant battery to the power coming from *you,* so there’s a lot to get used to!” Webby added.

“Comes from *us,”* Lena corrected, but she sounded happier, and she lifted up her hand to show the friendship bracelet. “It’s way better than Magica’s shadow magic stuff.”

“Of course it is!” Webby agreed. Violet nodded.

“Has she attempted to reach out to you at all?” Violet asked, peering at her sister with curiosity. Lena flinched.

“I- no, why would she do that?”

“Well, perhaps not her directly. But Poe seemed intrigued by you,” Violet replied carefully. Lena huffed, shrugging best she could with Webby pressed against her.

“Haven’t heard from either of them. Magica probably told him I was a traitor to their creepy shadow family or something,” Lena said lightly. Webby could tell it bothered her a bit, but she let it go; Lena clearly didn’t want to talk about it.

Webby mostly wanted to hear about Magica and Poe’s mom anyway; what kind of person *she* had been, for Magica to name Lena after her. Was she nice? Worse than Magica? Somewhere in the middle? Uncle-Mr. McDuck hadn’t known anything, when they asked, and Uncle Donald only knew what they had overheard.

It made her think about her *own* mother. And father. What they might have been like, if she’d ever gotten to meet them. Granny had never said much about them, had kinda implied that they hadn’t been very close before they died. Webby had to guess that spy work had kept them distant, until they died and Granny had to take her in.

She wondered if Granny ever regretted her choice. If she missed working with SHUSH, taking down FOWL bases and fighting Black Heron. Granny would never *say* it, but she and Uncle Donald both had the same funny way of acting when dangerous stuff happened; worried, nervous, and *excited.* Like it had been something they were missing.

Uncle Donald only got like that when they were all safe and *he* was the one in danger. Otherwise he was too worried about them.

She remembered the temple, and the *scream* that had come from him when he'd seen Dewey pinned down, and the fire and-

She shuddered, and nestled further into Lena's side. She didn't want to think about that.

"So, who wants to see if we can summon Violet's great grandma and ask her for her pudding recipe?" Lena suggested.

"Me!"

To: Webbigail Vanderquack

From: May Duck

CC: Donna Duck

Subject: RE: Photos?

Hi Webby!

Sorry for the delays in reaching back out to you, I've been traveling for my MMA circuit and haven't had a moment to breathe in weeks! It's super cool

to hear you're joining the family, we'll have to meet when I'm back in Duckburg! Sooo jealous you got to see the new egg first! Have they started coming up with names?

I know we've got piles of photos, videos, all sorts of stuff still at mom's place! I don't think any of us will be in town to help out sorting through it, but if you're alright with digging through some of the flotsam and jetsam, mom could probably just send over the boxes.

Mom, could you send over some of the family photos? See the below for details, but we're looking for anything with Uncle Donald, Panchito and José for a family album. Don't tell Uncle Donald! It's a surprise for a baby shower gift!

Keep me posted! I'll ask around and see if anyone else has any good stuff for you!

Cheers,

May Duck

To: May Duck

From: Webbigail Vanderquack

CC: Donna Duck

Subject: RE: Photos?

Thanks so much! We'd be happy to sort through stuff; Huey said we could digitize some things, if you want? That way all the tapes are all together. You can send over whatever you want!

Thanks soo so so much! I would love to meet you!!!

<3 Webby

Chapter End Notes

Jojo (Josephine) Normandy borrowed (with permission!) from leaden, from their fic 'Life Was Easier When I Only Cared About Me.' GO check it out!

https://archiveofourown.org/works/50222005/chapters/126845221

Doctor T. B. Perkins

C4 was near murderous by the time Donald was ready to leave Costa Rica. Their resident Eggheads had opted to talk. Wanted to see if they could join SHUSH, even, grateful for the opportunity to live after being captured in the first place. Were willing to go through retraining, be on probation for as long as SHUSH saw it necessary, the whole shebang.

They'd even picked names, though none of them had selected a last name that Donald was aware of.

'Head Wound' had chosen Minerva, though she was largely going by Min, delighted at the idea of having *two* names in one. She had confirmed she was their small squad's leader, and had happily sat for hours upon hours of interrogations, by Donald and by C4 and by the handful of other agents on site that Ravenson insisted all go in separately and not compare notes until afterwards.

The others, who were going by Brick, Aradia and Luna (though Luna had changed their mind three times already and was already looking contemplative about a fourth switch), were equally helpful. Didn't mind being alone, being interrogated and cross checked and pushed.

It made Donald worried about how FOWL treated their people. It made C4 more paranoid than a Russian czar.

He did *not* like that Ravenson was considering allowing them to join as SHUSH recruits. He liked it even less that RN was offering to take on the task personally, excited by the idea of bringing them into the fold.

"We aren't going to just hand over the keys to the building, Agent C4,

but I cannot deny their potential usefulness," Ravenson had snapped in their latest debate. "If you notice any specific behaviors or actions that concern you, relay them immediately, but at the moment we are proceeding."

C4 was convinced that Donald had had something to do with the fast tracked idea. He hadn't, he'd focused on visiting the group and trying to get them to ask for something, *anything,* to do in their cells besides what were clearly training exercises.

"They're a ticking timebomb," C4 had growled. "We aren't so short on *good* recruits that we need to resort to turncoats."

"I see them as extractions," Donald had retorted, and continued printing off instructions for how to play gin rummy to give to Brick, who was slowly developing an interest in card games.

"The only reason they left FOWL was because you *shot out their knees."*

Yes, he had. They were all still in casts because of that.

"They could have made an escape attempt after that. They could have stayed silent during interrogation, or lied, but everything has checked out so far."

Not that they'd had much to tell; apparently FOWL thought it a waste of time to tell their Egghead agents more than absolutely necessary; their mission had been to kill the SHUSH agents, retrieve all evidence, then report back for a rendezvous point. They'd checked the place they'd been dropped off and had been using as a base, but it was no more than a shack in the woods, and none of their equipment would make contact.

“But *why* would they turn so fast! If they’ll betray FOWL they’ll betray us!” C4 had insisted. Donald shrugged.

“I think you’re underestimating how loyal child soldiers are, when they’re presented another option,” he’d said, and left before he gave in to the urge to break C4’s jaw.

The ex-Eggheads had said their training had been a three year process. None of them remembered anything *before* that, besides vague memories of being very small. Which meant they may well only *be* three years old, if Donald’s artificial aging theory was correct. But they were clearly full adults; they lacked some basic knowledge of the world in general, clearly sheltered, but their reasoning and cognitive skills were far beyond a child of the same age.

A conundrum. He personally didn’t think they should join SHUSH either, for different reasons than C4 had; he thought they should be given the opportunity to live as something *other* than an agent of one agency or another. SHUSH was a better option than FOWL, at least they didn’t kill agents that failed their missions, but he thought they should be given the chance to try something, anything else.

But it was their choice, and as much as he thought it was a currently misguided one, at least in SHUSH they would have down time and could move off-site. They could quit, if it came down to it.

He’d consider things again when they were in his class, he supposed. The intention was, if everything went well, that they join the standard trainee squad, so he could judge their progress when they got there.

Since one of the few things they had been able to confirm in questions so far was that they were indeed intended to kill the entire SHUSH

squad and all of the local PD that had been assisting, so Ravenson had flooded the area with more SHUSH agents to try and protect the locals in case FOWL tried another round. It helped that the manhunt was ongoing for the ex-staff members.

It was less convenient that that particular search was turning up nothing, and their recruits didn't know anything about it. They'd only been sent to clean up, and to retrieve the bodies.

They still had no clear timeline of events, the cold water and the freezing meant that neither body could give a precise time of death. But they were confident that Alvarez had been dead longer than Acosta, or at least longer than Acosta had been out of the freezer, so the prevailing theory was still that he had been in on it and had either gotten cold feet and tried to flee, or was double crossed.

330, or Timely now, he'd been *ecstatic* to get his first nickname, Donald found in a lower laboratory, searching through social media posts for any potential clues.

"I'm trying to find any photos that either have metadata still attached or something that I can use to confirm a date and time manually," he explained to Donald when he saw him. His eyes had the feverish light of desperation. "We can narrow down the time of death if I can find something."

"When's the last time you slept?" Donald asked, ignoring the ramble. Timely frowned, blinking a few times like he was having trouble switching topics.

"Um…"

Donald waited, patiently, while Timely floundered, then shook his

head.

“If you can’t remember, it’s been too long,” he said, and dragged the kid out of the lab, ignoring the protests.

Once Timely crashed, which took about two seconds once he was no longer standing, Donald went back to the lab levels to find Doctor T. Perkins, who was there alone; the assistant from last time was apparently elsewhere.

He was examining the photos of the dryad when Donald arrived, and only hummed an absent response when Donald entered the room, squinting at the semi-distorted face.

“You reported these features were how you identified the victim?” He asked.

“They were clearer the day before,” Donald answered, “but yes. The rain storm we got between the first day and the second kickstarted the decaying process.”

“This far exceeds standard decay,” Perkins replied, pointing to a second set of photos Yellow had taken later, likely whenever she had left the flowers.

“Fairly standard for dryads; the body decays so the children can benefit faster.”

“Children?”

“Next generation of trees; they’re usually surrounded by a grove of saplings; some species even share a root system,” Donald explained. Perkins considered that for a moment, flipping between two close-ups of the face. It was a striking change between only a day, and by now Donald knew the majority of the trunk was gone, fallen into the water as nutritious mushy pulp for the roots to grab and feed on.

“Would those… children be available for an interview?” Perkins asked, almost eager. It was the most emotion Donald could recall seeing on his face; it made him look younger.

“I- you know, I have no idea,” he confessed after thinking for a moment. “It can depend on the species, honestly.”

“Fascinating.” The grin he received in return was downright horrifying; it’d been a while since he worked with a mad scientist.

Thankfully for Donald’s sanity, Perkins was more focused on his notes than anything else as they drove back out to the grove one last time before he went home; he’d have to find a reason to visit, later. Make sure she was still doing well, after everything. He didn't think she was quite able to interview right now anyway; despite their earlier conversation, she had felt exhausted and dormant right afterwards. He imagined she would be tired for some time, recovering energy.

As usual, while the place was crawling with agents, the grove was quiet and deserted. Despite most of the agents being aware it was just off the forest path, they were alone.

Perkins seemed fascinated by that, and stopped on the path to make copious notes and even pulled out a scanner of some kind before they went further in. Donald wasn’t sure what it was scanning for, but whatever it was seemed to disappoint Perkins, who eventually shoved it back into his bag.

The sapling was nearly three feet tall when they got to it, a crown of leaves taking in all the available light from the gaping hole in the canopy. The waves lapped pleasantly at the roots, and the flowers were thriving.

“Your photos show a very different environment,” Perkins noted as he strode forward; his tail thrashed back and forth as he carefully stepped across the roots. “The soil would have had to recover significantly to account for this level of growth.”

“The flowers were planted afterwards,” Donald pointed out.

“Your description of the site was dead, ashy grey soil and a rotting tree. I see none of that here.”

Donald considered him for a moment.

“You remember the four leaf clover?” He asked, and when he received a terse nod, he continued. “This was like that, only a much larger scale. Dead, dying, and frankly, everything that isn’t currently underwater wasn’t really decaying, it was just disintegrating into nothing. And it was spreading, like a blight.”

Donald hopped backwards on his roots, until he was standing at the edge, where the water stopped. It wasn’t a soft transition; the earth ended in a sharp drop.

“The storm washed it all out,” he explained, “and that seemed to wash away whatever was keeping things from recovering. This rapid growth? *That’s* normal; this wasn’t. The Blot’s weapons aren’t natural; what they do breaks the life cycle.”

Perkins hummed in thought, making a note.

“So rapid decay after death is the expected result of the death of a… dryad,” he said slowly, feeling his way over the word ‘dryad’ like it was a strange taste in his mouth. “Rapid decay allowing for an equally fast growth rate of new plants in its place.”

He continued muttering to himself as he walked closer to the trunk. A few of the branches trembled as he grew closer; Donald watched closely.

“So this would be a child of the victim?” He asked, looking at the sapling.

“In a sense,” Donald said carefully. “Growing from the trunk itself is… unusual.”

“In what way?”

“Imagine an infant coming out of a corpse.”

“Ah.”

He grew closer to the sapling. Donald watched. The branches trembled.

“Remarkable growth,” he murmured, clearly to himself.

He continued muttering, making notes, walking around the base of the dying trunk. Finally, he reached the remains of the face and torso, soggy and rotting. From where he stood, Donald could just make out the shape of the nose and brow, the reach of the arm, but the finer details that had been so heart wrenching to see had faded. It made looking at the remains more palatable.

Perkins clearly disagreed; his face had gone white, even under his already white fur, when he got there. His eyes darted over her face, her arms, the desperate reach towards the sea.

“I… can see how you were able to easily identify her,” he said quietly, and he stepped carefully back one step, head bowing low and ears drooping. He murmured something, not to himself but to her face.

The branches stopped trembling. A breeze flitted through the leaves, leaving the crisp smell of new growth and salty sea air.

Donald relaxed. Perkins did not; he glanced warily around, ears flickering slightly, as the waves brushed his ankles.

“When you said the sea washed away the dead soil,” he said slowly, looking out at the ocean, and the water beneath his feet, “Do you mean that literally, or in an… energy sense?”

Donald wondered if he would break out in hives if he said magic.

“Both,” he replied. “But don’t ask me how the second one worked. I haven’t the faintest idea.”

Liar, a voice like fresh green growth and salty air giggled in his ear. Apparently she was more awake than expected.

A touch humble, are we? Another voice, dry as the Sahara and deep as the darkness of space hummed from behind him.

He ignored both. Perkins didn't appear to notice they had additional guests. He made his way back, pausing at the base of the tree to nod at the sapling; her leaves fluttered in a response.

"Explain what you can of the situation, then, if you don't know how it ended. As I recall, you were the one who said that energy couldn't go back to the one it was stolen from," Perkins ordered.

"Not much to report that you don't already know," Donald hedged, leaning back on his heels."Found the victim, but couldn't address it without drawing the local's attention. Came back after the storm to find that the dead ground washed away entirely, and the trunk starting to decay properly. Best guess is the ocean was able to clean things away."

"That is absurdly vague," Perkins snapped.

"Magic tends to be," Donald said brightly. "You want concrete answers, stick with science."

"I am attempting to find a way to track your genocidal madman down, and you think this is a time to joke around?"

"If you were going to be able to track him down, Doctor Perkins, I would think you would have *done that by now,"* Donald snarled back,

his temper rising. “You’ve had his actual weaponry on hand for weeks.”

“His *inactive* weaponry! We are unable to track the blasted things when they aren’t in operation, and he seems to favor locations that block our sensors. We should have been able to find him in that theatre in Duckburg!”

“And he keeps the unstable power cells locked up in lead crates,” Donald added, blinking. “He’s- that’s not to keep magic users from sensing him. It’s to keep someone from tracing the energy signal.”

“Precisely! Which means we need another avenue of energy to track!” Perkins all but yelled. “The blight, as you called it, might have been an option, but it appears to have been washed away entirely, so we are once again bereft of options!”

He looked frustrated, eyes red rimmed (and they were *already* red to begin with), deep bags beneath. Tail flicking back and forth like he was close to attacking something. Or someone.

“This is one of the few times we’ve discovered the results of his experimentation where there was a physical result, and once again-”

“Would a living victim help?”

Perkins stopped, staring.

“What?”

“A living victim. Could you get the results you need from them?”

Perkins squinted at him, frowning.

“I was under the impression we could not *reach* the survivors,” he noted. “That the magical species die upon first being drained, like our-like her, and the others fled and are in hiding.”

“Most are,” Donald said slowly, distantly, feeling the burning emptiness in his chest. It had scarred over, over the years, becoming less of a detriment, but either the reminder of the Blot or something else had awoken the pain all over again.

It occurred to him that the volcanic energy might have something to do with it; that the burning may have done more than left scars, it may have reopened others.

“But there’s one still in Duckburg,” he continued, and Perkins’ eyes narrowed further.

“Who?”

“Someone I think you wanted to talk to; Paperinik confirmed that he was struck during the Phantom Blot’s first run.”

“He isn’t a magic user,” Perkins argued. Donald stared at him, one eyebrow raised.

“The only difference between a magic user and the average person,”

Donald said carefully, “is one of them has successfully cast a spell, and the other didn’t. You want a victim, we have one we can call.”

Donald had no idea how he was going to make this work. But he was tired of being so behind the Blot; if this was what it took, he was doing it.

He left Perkins in the Costa Rica lab. Well, he’d *been* left behind at the doors, Perkins striding inside calling, “Come now, we must prepare for tonight!”

There was no answer; Donald hesitated in the doorway, wondering if he was supposed to be following, but Perkin’s face twisted slightly before he shook his head, face reddening slightly.

“My apologies, my assistant usually- it is an inside joke,” he admitted, before waving Donald off. Donald shrugged it off, left his final report in C4’s temporary office, and finally, finally, flew home.

He was due to land in the middle of the night, so took the chance on a brief layover in Texas to call to wish the kids goodnight.

They didn’t answer.

Thankfully, his phone pinged again while he debated who to call and panic at.

Louie: shhhh were supposed to be bigfoot hunting with mom

Louie: im not supposed to have my phone :P

Unca Donald: alright, just wanted to tell everyone im on my wy home

Unca Donald: i should be back tomorrow! Love you all <3

Louie: <3

At least they were having fun. And Bigfoot hunting was basically just an excuse to go camping with an adventurous twist on it. He was surprised Della had opted to do it that way, but maybe she was actually trying to keep things relaxed a bit longer?

He snorted at the thought, but hey, who knew?

His phone went off again when he landed in Duckburg. Twice as he got off the plane. A third one just as he was getting his phone out of his pocket. Except it wasn't his phone, he realized, looking at his blank screen; it was the communicator in his phone/gauntlet.

Gizmo: hey so i know we havent had a chance to chat about this BUT i have our project finished!

Gizmo: the save your friend at the tower one, sorry for being vague! Ive been at SHUSH for days and my head is fried

Gizmo: anyway! Please let me know when youre free so we ccan dive in! I

dont know for sure if our first try will work so the sooner the better, right?

Donald's knees wobbled; he managed to find a bench to collapse in, bag dragged behind him with a rattle and a concerning crack.

PK: now

PK: im free now i just got back to town

PK: im heading back to the tower tonight

He hadn't planned to, but for *Uno?* Donald would sacrifice sleep, it was barely a question.

Gizmo: i cant get there now now, but i can be there tonight for sure! Ill meet you there!

Donald got to the Tower. He… probably got a taxi. Or he drove? He hadn't left his car at the airport, though, he'd gotten a ride. So, taxi?

His bags were with him, and he had his wallet, so he really didn't care.

Uno's orb was dark. Fenton's initial tech attempts and loose wires from the last visit were sitting out.

That would be helping him wake Uno up soon. He could speak to his friend again. He *would,* he couldn't think of another option.

He probably shouldn't have come straight here. Or he should try to take a nap; he hadn't slept in… he didn't even know, honestly. He was shaky, he didn't know if he'd eaten today, and he couldn't think of anything at *all-*

His amulet was warm. Concern, love, affection. He sent back the tangle of emotions he was feeling, uncertain how to even begin to explain himself.

His phone began ringing. Yeah, he should have expected that.

"Amor, are you-"

"I need you both at Ducklair Tower," Donald interrupted, " *please.* I- you'll need costumes, but I need you here, I *can't, I can't do this alone,* please-"

"Donal', just tell us you aren't hurt, we're on the way out the door, but we need to know what's going on," Panchito said, soothingly, but Donald could hear chaos around him, like he was rushing to find clothing or their car keys or a sword or-

"Not hurt, just- Pancho he was *dead,* and we might be able to bring him back, I just…"

" *Dead?"*

A rustling sound, a shutting car door, the start of an engine.

“Donald, Panchito is driving. Stay on the line with me, okay?” José was saying now.

“You let Panchito drive?” Donald managed to ask, chuckling, as he got himself together; he wanted the PK costume for this. He wanted- it wasn’t like Uno didn’t know what he looked like, but it seemed wrong to do this as Double Duck.

“We wanted to move quickly!”

“I can drive very well Donal’!”

Donald giggled. He pulled the phone away to tie on his mask.

“Can you explain what we are walking into?” José asked. Donald let out a breath.

“I- it’s hard to explain, but…”

Slowly, painfully, he told them about Uno. Their first chaotic meeting, their growing partnership, the Evronians and the Time Police. Lyla and Odin and even Everett, though he choked as he spoke the bastard’s name. Xadhoom, Stefan. How half of them had gone to other planets and times when Donald had retired, how Uno had-

He couldn’t say it. But José understood.

“So we are hoping to wake him up tonight?”

“Yes,” Donald replied, as he opened the doors for them to come up. “Yeah, Gizmo- he thinks he can reactivate him. I just- I couldn’t be completely alone for this and- Gizmo will be here with me, obviously, but…”

But Fenton didn’t know he was Donald, and suddenly that felt limiting. The idea of revealing this very personal breakdown to someone that didn’t actually know his name seemed so wrong.

The elevator doors opened. Donald twisted to greet them, and-

“You brought the egg *with you?!”*

We Really do Need to Call this one Tron

“We didn’t have time to find a sitter!” Panchito immediately explained; he was wearing the black shirt from the other night, but no mask, and the egg was carefully swaddled to his chest.

José nodded soothingly.

“Gizmo doesn’t know my real identity!” Donald exclaimed, eyes wide. “He’s going to recognize-”

“Why would he recognize them? Has he seen the egg before?” José asked calmly, stepping forward. He was fully dressed, tugging his own mask on; he must have changed in the car?

“He-”

Had he?

Donald paused, frowning. Drake had seen the egg, but had Fenton? He *knew,* Donald was certain of that, but it wasn’t like Scrooge had been taking the egg to the office, so unless he had photos…?

Then again, how many people had a magic egg right now in Duckburg?

How many of them were a throuple with a rooster, a parrot and a duck?

But explaining that would require him to say that Gizmo was in fact *Fenton,* who had a slightly better reason to know who they all were, and he couldn't reveal his identity.

"I- okay, it's- it's fine," he said slowly, sighing. He walked up to grab them both in a shaky hug; his skin was *crawling* with nerves and he desperately needed something to ground him.

His partners and their egg were more than sufficient; he sighed, feeling some tension drain from his spine.

Panchito stepped back, putting on his mask with a flourish.

"Voila! I am disguised! Nobody will recognize us now!" He crowed, and Donald managed a weak chuckle, before he noticed something *else.*

"Is that a gun?!"

"You didn't specify what kind of help you needed! I wanted to be prepared!" Panchito insisted, adjusting his shirt so everything was straight, the egg was neatly hidden in the folds and the holster disguised at his hip.

Not that Panchito didn't *usually* carry a weapon, but seeing it now was distracting.

At least it wasn't the whip. He was probably carrying it, but he couldn't see it, and that meant he didn't have to think about it.

He sighed, double checked his own mask, and yanked on the voice changer in a panic when he realized it was still sitting on the desk. Just in time; the system let out an alarm indicating that Gizmo was on the roof. Donald stepped back, took a breath, and let him in.

“PK! Good to see you, I think I have- oh! You have guests…?” Gizmo skidded to a stop, looking around the room with a surprised quirk to his beak. Donald nodded.

“Yeah, sorry that I didn’t warn you, I- I needed the emotional support,” Donald explained with a sheepish grin. José stepped up to give a small wave; Panchito stepped back just slightly, so the egg satchel was slightly disguised behind the two of them.

Donald loved them so much he could burst; they always knew just what to do.

“Oh! Yeah, that should be fine- actually, that helps a lot! See, that way we can both be in the system! Since you’re not as familiar with the tech and I’m not as familiar with you friend, if we have people outside watching, that means I can join you!”

Gizmo slid forward, setting his box of bits and bobs down on the floor.

“So we’ve kinda met, Green Bat, right? And, uh, I didn’t catch your name before…?”

“I am El Gallo Loco!” Panchito announced; Donald bit back a groan by force of habit, while José shook his head fondly. “It is a pleasure to meet you!”

And there was the signature Panchito hand shake; Donald could almost hear the armor rattling in his grip, and Gizmo looked pretty ruffled by the end of it.

“Wait, like the luchador…?” Gizmo asked cautiously, before shaking his head. “No, no, time for that later! Uh, can I ask later what happened to the magical creatures though? Cause you were the ones that took them, and SHUSH wasn’t sure what happened…”

Continuing to chatter, he deactivated most of his armor, leaving him in the helmet, gauntlets, and a black undershirt. Began doing… something, Donald didn’t know, working on a headset that looked a lot like his own, connecting it to Uno’s computer, then going back for a monitor, several smaller gizmos and gadgets, and enough wiring to cover the entire tower.

“ … so we’re pretty sure that the helicopter was waiting in advance, and PK, you didn’t ever *see* him, so I think they’re trying to confirm if maybe he wasn’t physically there, and Mme Rouge managed to slip out and meet him-”

Apparently he was talking about the Blot now. Donald leaned against a counter, looking at Uno’s orb.

“Were any personal items found in the rubble?” José asked curiously. “We’ve discussed the possibility of tracking him if we could find one; his magic is supposedly very unique.”

“Nothing that I’ve heard, but I can ask again if you want!”

“Please do! I would like our mutual friend to sleep sometime this year!” José laughed. Panchito popped up on Donald’s other side to sit on the counter.

“Are you ready?” He asked, glancing at the orb. Dark, it had been dark for so long.

“I’ve been ready for almost twenty years,” Donald replied lowly. “I just hope this works.”

He didn’t dare think that anything could go wrong. He knew Odin was alive in the future; he *had* to hold onto that certainty.

“It will! If not tonight, then when our friend fixes things and we try again! But either way, we will be here with you,” Panchito told him calmly. Like there was no question of them being there, him and José and maybe even their egg, still tucked against his shirt. Donald could just see the glow through the dark fabric, but if he wasn’t looking the egg could almost be a larger belly.

“Alright, PK! Here’s what we’re doing,” Gizmo called out, drawing his attention. “We’ll be dropping into a virtual version of the mainframe using these headsets; I’ll try to guide us, but I’m not sure what things will look like on the inside, so be prepared for that!

“Our goal is to find our way past the firewall; if Uno’s only been deactivated, we just need to reactivate his system again and he should be able to boot back up.”

“Just like that?” Donald couldn’t help but ask.

“Well, I can’t predict everything, but that’s the basic idea,” Gizmo confessed, rubbing the back of his head. “Worst case scenario, we get an idea of the layout of the system and have to come back at a later time. So, er, El Gallo, Green Bat, you two can monitor things here!”

He swung around to the screen he'd brought and the varying systems.

"I didn't expect to have other people watching, so you being here is great! You just need to watch this screen; it'll show the system stats. Just let us know if anything starts sounding alarms or if the text turns red; that might mean things are overheating. Not that I'm expecting them to! Just in case!"

"How can we reach you?" Panchito asked, hopping closer. Donald walked slower, jittery excitement starting to run through his mind. They were *doing* this, they were going to wake Uno up.

He was going to call him Sleeping Beauty for a *decade,* when he woke up. He was going to find every single soap opera episode about comas and play them in a never-ending loop for a year, he was going to-

He was going to hug that stupid orb like he used to until Uno was complaining about overheating.

"... you ready?" Gizmo was asking. Donald nodded, taking the headset carefully. He tossed his hat onto the counter, and slipped the goggles on.

This was much easier than portalling into the system physically, Donald thought with amusement. At least he was pretty sure if he died here he wouldn't die in reality.

Actually…

“If we die in here, what happens?” He asked, as Fenton (and he was Fenton now, his armor was gone) shook his head as though to clear it.

“What? Uh, nothing, should just boot you out of the system, why?”

“Wanted to know if I would die,” Donald replied easily, glancing down at himself. He, unlike Fenton, was still in his costume. Maybe it was a personal choice?

“We won’t *die,* why would I design it like that?” Fenton exclaimed; from the tone of his voice, he’d had this argument before. “Why would *anyone* do that?”

“Last time I did something like this, we were physically in the computer,” Donald noted absently. “And we *could* die in that one. I like your method better.”

“ *Last time?!”*

“Are you both in? The lights and screen are very… covered in data?” Panchito called from- somewhere. It was a strange sensation, because Donald couldn’t tell where he was, except he knew if he took the headset off the answer was ‘three feet away from you.’ Disconcerting.

“We’re in!” Fenton answered, pressing something on his ear- a comm? Interesting.

The space they stood in wasn’t like Tron’s world, with the harsh blue lighting and dark flat planes. They were standing in a vast, open space, but distantly Donald could see walls; it was like they were standing in the Tower again, but a much bigger version, with no

furniture inside.

He supposed that this system had been created to be one person, not a vast network. It was bound to look different.

“So we’re in, but we’re kinda in the space before logging in, if that makes sense,” Fenton explained, looking around. “We need to find the entrance to the actual system. Probably a door or gate?”

So saying, he started walking towards what appeared to be the center of the room. Donald let him lead; this was more Fenton’s area of expertise than his own.

As they walked, Donald could just make out what appeared to be a… desk? No, a building, within the room itself, no visible doors or entrances. It was small, but Donald supposed it didn’t need to be large, this wasn’t a literal space.

“Alright, this is a start!” Fenton said cheerfully, stepping forward. Donald paused, blinking at the wall, then the floor.

“Wait!” He shouted, grabbing Fenton’s shirt and dragging him back, just as flames spurted from the floor in front of them. Fenton gasped, even though he’d said the damage wouldn’t be literal, and stumbled back.

“Firewall,” Donald huffed, amused despite himself, and he peered around. “Guess the system thinks we’re a virus.”

“That does make sense,” Fenton panted, laughing. “Alright, first step is seeing how to get past that.”

He pulled out a computer, which was probably not real, and plugged it into nothing, since nothing *else* was real, and frowned. Donald, meanwhile, eyed the places where the flames had burst out. Fenton had stepped on a trigger, which was also the spout, so it looked like the system was designed to only hit someone that actively tried stepping past it, instead of continuing to go after them once they'd moved away.

Fenton seemed distracted, so Donald just shrugged and started walking the perimeter, noting where each spout was. They were close enough together that there was no way to pass in between any two, and they went off even if Donald waved a hand *over* instead of walking on them, so proximity sensor for sure. He could feasibly try jumping higher than the sensor, but he couldn't tell if there was a second layer of protection past the first one, so jumping without a plan seemed stupid.

For now. Desperation might take hold at some point.

Then, there. One single point where the firewall had a gap. Donald paused, considering it. Then carefully stepped through it.

No fire. Instead, a voice.

"Identification, please."

It wasn't Uno. The voice was closer to Due's, but more just- artificial and vaguely male. But it was closer than any other voice he'd heard in years, and it made him smile.

"Old Cape," he said quietly. Not Paperinik, never Paperinik. Uno had

been adamant that they couldn't use his publicly known name for his identity in the system, because it was too easy to guess.

"But we can't use your real *name, or someone might overhear you!"* Uno had also explained sharply, while Donald had laughed and asked who would ever be able to get far enough into the system to even get to use an identification.

"You'll catch them in the actual traps before they ever get to trying to mess with the all-powerful orb!"

"Accepted."

There was a click. Donald had to assume it was the firewall powering down. He took a step forward, and was relieved to find himself *not* on fire, but instead-

The floor fell away, leaving a cliffside of stone just on the edge of his toes, nothing between them and the building at all. Donald peered down, and heard a distant shout of surprise.

"Gizmo!"

"I'm fine! Did, ah- did you do that?" Gizmo shouted back; Donald couldn't see him.

"Think so, yeah."

Just past his toes, yawning emptiness. He'd expected something to be

down there, maybe fire, or a city street from the view of a camera, but it was just nothing.

“I think it’s probably- like the recycling folder?” Fenton continued, now coming around the corner; he was running. “So, uh, we should avoid falling in there!”

“I thought you said we couldn’t die here!”

“Well, *I* didn’t design it to do that, but I can’t rule everything out about how *Uno’s* system might treat an invader-”

“Password?” The system’s voice asked. Donald peered at the chasm in front of him. Then he took a careful, deep breath.

“We can’t have a password, PK, because if we do, someone could guess it based on psychology or common words in our lives, or even through torturing one of us. I’m not going to compromise the integrity of my system security by tying it to something as easy to determine as a single *word,* and the fact that you think that would make it easier for you to access my system if I am somehow indisposed is *ridiculous.”* He recited carefully, feeling a stupid grin cross his face as he did.

In front of him, a rope bridge formed. He didn’t step forward.

“But Uno, what if I was cloned and you had to figure out who I was?” He continued. “Wouldn’t it be better to have some way of knowing it was me?”

A pause. The bridge wavered.

“ *I would know you anywhere, anytime,”* Uno’s recorded voice said, so fond that Donald felt like crying. “ *I don’t need some silly password to identify you.”*

“Humor me,” Donald said, choking on his breath. “Just in case?”

“ *Fine. Just in case.”*

The rope bridge vanished, and was replaced by a stone one. Solid, trustworthy.

“Look, I know they’re easier to make, Uno, but you should never trust a rope bridge!” A younger Donald said, the recording crackling with Uno’s laughter. “ *They always snap at the most dramatic moment, it’s like there’s some god of ropes just* waiting- *don’t you laugh at me, what do you know ya big palooka?!”*

Behind him, Fenton was chuckling quietly. Donald turned and winked at him, before he started walking on the bridge.

“Not coming, Giz?”

“I think he won’t let me in any further. You’re the one with the passcodes,” Fenton called back. “I’ll stay close to help, but I think he really only wants you in there.”

So saying, he took one step back from the firewall space, and sat on the ground to, apparently, wait him out.

Alright, just him going into Uno's digital mind, where he had no idea what he might find. Memories? More identity tests? Recordings of soap operas?

He walked forward. It didn't matter if the entire building was full of nothing but death traps, digital Evronians, Raider making off with random computer chips, whatever. He was going to get Uno back.

House of Mirrors

Nothing happened until he reached the small building. Fenton had some kind of view into the system, or maybe he was getting intel from José and Panchito, still sitting in the real world. Either way, he'd confirmed they were probably in the right place; he just needed to find Uno and wake him up.

"What will that look like?"

"I, ah- not quite sure! It might depend on what form he's in- a computer might just need a button pushed?" Fenton called back, so Donald was basically going in blind. Go in, figure it out.

He'd worked with less.

There was a faint pressure on his hand. He was guessing one, or both of the Cabs, were holding his hand. It helped, greatly, even if he knew it was a bit silly. *He* wasn't in any real danger.

Was he?

The inside of the building was… strange. It kinda looked like the set of Anxieties, honestly; different important rooms strewn with clothing or weapons, like someone had upended a box of props over everything. The rooms didn't connect normally, either; the living room Donald was standing in was Julia's, if he recalled correctly, but where the front door ought to be, there was just another living room.

That living room was his. Not his current house, but the one in the Manor, one Donald had called Uno from a few times. He'd had pictures of him and Della in that room, which had to be how Uno

knew what it looked like at all, but there was nobody inside, and the wall that couldn't be seen in those photos became the open field where Maria and Theodore had had a rendezvous interrupted by Miguel.

Donald continued wandering. Here was another set, with Donald's old jacket hanging on a hook on the wall. There was Lyla's old trench coat, here was a pile of newspapers about Paperinik. Photos of Everett, of Donald, of Lyla and even Raider hung on every wall at random places and angles, like the data was jumbled and unorganized. But it was all *here*.

There were recordings of Paperinik's early nonsense, and the footage of his first Evronian fight. More recordings from the Tower; them hanging out, arguing about Anxieties and other shows and how to handle new threats; Donald trying to explain magic and Uno doubting him.

So much of this was just Donald. Donald, in and out of uniform. Joking, injured, unconscious. Venting about adventures and future crime investigations with Lyla and-

And Odin.

"He was stupidly tall, Uno, I need you to know that. Even in the future! Tall, and annoying! Smug jerk thought he knew everything about everything, acted like it was some big joke-" Donald complained, flopped over the orb, but this view was from the orb itself, Uno's eyes looking up at his distorted face and laughing.

"Sounds like you met your perfect match, Old Cape!" Uno insisted, but Donald could see- there was text running through that memory, like it was Uno's internal thoughts. About Odin's appearance, and how he talked, and how his name felt- not right, not like it was Uno's, but like

it *could* be.

Uno had known, then. That Odin would be him, someday.

He had to know that he would wake back up, someday. He'd known he couldn't tell Donald, because Donald hadn't- hadn't said that *he* knew.

Donald hated time travel.

He kept moving, looking for- he didn't know. Something. This seemed to be a random assortment of Uno's memories, with no real rhyme or reason; was there some pattern he hadn't found? A path to the right place?

But this was Uno's mind, not a test or a maze; Donald had to consider why Uno would design it like that. Instead of an orderly layout of thoughts, it was just a pile. Unplanned, messy.

Donald looked around again. Not messy, he determined. Cozy. Like Uno had set up a digital scrapbook of memories and favorite things, things he would want to see every day. If the whole environment was his mind, there had to be a space for him to access the outside world, past his personal data. He didn't know what *that* would look like, but if he found it, he should be able to backtrack to Uno's… bedroom? Whatever space he went when he was shut down.

If that even existed. Maybe *all* of this was Uno, and he should just start yelling for him to wake up already.

He wandered further. The rooms didn't really follow any logic as far

as he could see, they didn't even seem to spatially fit in the building he was walking through. So he tried to follow the logic he *could* find. The living rooms were all together, now that he was looking at them. His, the varying sets of the show, a room he thought was Lyla's old apartment; had they ever taken a photo there?

So if they were classified by *type,* he needed to move on.

He started talking as he did.

"Uno, I hope you know your place is an architect's nightmare," he called out to the fifth kitchen he'd found. "Nobody needs this many kitchens. You can't even *cook."*

"Can you? Do you eat here?" He continued, passing another kitchen and spotting a set of stairs through a doorway.

Stairs and stairs and stairs; if they were genuinely in a building it would be thirty stories tall, but Donald recalled this was a digital space and just jumped. Nothing was real here, therefore gravity could be ignored.

"Can you fly around here? Did you give yourself a full body, or do you just wander like a ghost in the wires?" He asked, wincing as the word ghost passed his beak. The building felt haunted and empty, much as he was trying to ignore it. There was no sense of life, and Uno had always been *so* alive- this felt wrong. As wrong as the Tower had felt since the deactivation.

"We should get you a real body," he added. "When you wake up. Maybe get some jets in your legs so you can fly around Duckburg instead. Did you know we've got an android in the family now? His name is Boyd, I think you'd like him. Good kid, really sweet. He likes

to help me make breakfast when he stays overnight. He and Huey are both in the Woodchucks, with another friend of theirs, Violet. You'll love them, I swear."

He continued to chatter, just to fill the silence, with updates about the kids and the family, what he knew about Lyla and Stefan. He talked about the Blot's escape, his affiliation with FOWL, Donald's fear that they wouldn't catch him, that he was going to haunt Donald for the rest of his life.

About Lena, and José and Panchito, Xandra. 330 and his new nickname, Timely. Donald doubted Uno *wouldn't* find out about him being Double Duck, he was nosy like that and had endless resources to hack a spy database.

And Donald was fairly certain he'd talked about spy work in the tower at least once before, so Uno could just watch the security footage. If it existed.

At the top of the stairs were bedrooms. Bedrooms and bathrooms flowing through each other in a mobius strip pierced here and there with an endless hallway. Donald peered into each room, wondering if Uno would create one for himself. Or use one of the existing sets, or Donald's teenage bedroom.

Here he found more photos, stolen from security footage and traffic cameras, of Donald and Lyla and Stefan in town. People Donald knew Uno had never met, and wondered; did he pick people at random? Did he like that woman's hat, that child's backpack? He didn't know, but he continued asking Uno questions; did he want to be a photographer, should Donald take him to some other cities, or somewhere scenic?

And there was art here, too; as he looked, Donald realized they were places he'd described before. Uno's attempts to recreate an adventure

Donald had gone on; the temple was perfectly straight instead of leaning to the left like it had in reality. The carvings were vague attempts at Egyptian hieroglyphics because Donald hadn't explained they were too worn to read.

There was nothing, he realized, from Everett Ducklair on this level. He wondered at it, even as he was relieved not to see the bastard's smug face. God, the memory of their last conversation, him offering Donald *money* as some reward for services rendered, and not a word about Uno- he'd nearly killed a man that day.

But why wouldn't Uno have his creator here? He couldn't- had he known? Guessed that he must have been shut down at some point, because of Odin or something Lyla said? Donald prayed that he hadn't, that Uno hadn't been waiting for it to happen, without being able to tell Donald because of time travel bull-

There had been a sound. He froze, one foot in the air over some carpet that had no actual texture, just the appearance of softness.

Again. A beep. Quiet. Distant?

He carefully followed the noise down a branch in the hallway that he wasn't entirely certain had been there before. He didn't know if things were moving around, or if the door had just been hidden from him.

There were no other doors here, just one at the end. It was dark, unlike the rooms before it. The quiet beeping continued. Soft, consistent.

The door opened as Donald pressed on it, not fully latched.

Inside was the Tower room again. Smaller, almost homey.

Or claustrophobic.

This one didn't have any of the additions from the Paperinik days; the equipment, the medical space, the displays of uniforms and the space where the car was stored. The extra rooms were closed off and dark, like they'd been the first time Donald had arrived in the Tower.

The computer was dark. The orb lifeless.

He walked forward. If the house felt haunted, and the Tower like a tomb, this felt like a visitation. A morgue, a body lifeless in front of him. Except-

Except. The beeping. It was still quiet. So soft, like the quiet breaths of someone still sleeping. Donald stepped closer, peering, and there, just in the center of the orb- light.

Tiny. Fragile. Green.

Donald's hands were both on the glass, cold instead of the usual pleasant warmth, and he peered inside. It wasn't a face, just a tiny light. With every beep, the light pulsed. But it didn't grow; all the noise and nonsense Donald had been up to hadn't appeared to wake him.

But that was Uno. He was there. Sleeping.

“Alright, Aurora, let’s find your alarm clock,” Donald whispered. “Cause I don’t think true love’s kiss is going to cut it, here.”

He stepped back, hands lingering until he couldn’t keep in contact any longer, and he peered at the computer itself. Uno’s orb was his face, how he interacted with people, but the computer *was* him. That was the brain he needed to wake up, if he could just figure out how.

“Couldn’t just leave a giant ‘On’ button around somewhere?” He griped, meaning none of it, and he started peering around. There were no buttons at all, in fact; why would there be? Uno didn’t need them.

There was no obvious way to activate the system. Donald’s talking hadn’t apparently triggered anything besides getting past the firewall. What else was there to try?

What was something that always got Uno’s attention? Donald coming into the Tower injured, he supposed, but he couldn’t really injure himself here…

He blinked, glancing down at his bare wrists. With a thought, his gauntlet was there, open and ready. Carefully, slowly, he brought his wrist up to his face, hitting the comm button.

“Uno? I need medical evac, took a hit and- please wake up. I need your help,” he said, and the words echoed back through a speaker on the wall. He was aiming for his usual PK bravado and slipping into desperation as fear gripped him. He had no idea what to do here, he should have insisted that Fenton come with, he at least had some idea what was happening-

A beep. A *loud* one, and the screens flickered. Once, twice, then to full brightness, so harsh in the dark room Donald let out a pained screech

and flailed backwards, catching himself on the edge of the desk.

He forced his eyes back open, staring at the screens, praying please, please-

Rebooting: 0%

He stared. The number didn't change. Didn't change, didn't change, but it was *on,* was that…?

"Uno?"

Rebooting: .001%

Don't be so impatient, Old Cape!

Donald's knees gave out. His face was wet, his hands were warm. There was a loading bar below the text, and as he stared, the thinnest line of green appeared. It wasn't much, but that *had* to mean-

"PK! I think that was it!" A voice in his ear- was he wearing a comm link? How long- he hoped Fenton hadn't been able to hear everything he said.

He pressed at it, felt a click as the microphone apparently activated.

"I found his system," he said slowly. "It says rebooting now. Is that- should we stay to watch, or…?"

“No, your friends are saying the same thing happened in the real Tower!” Fenton insisted.

Donald didn’t want to leave. He wanted to linger and make sure, but- he couldn’t stay. He had so many, too many things to do.

Uno wouldn’t want him to stay and watch him load. Donald knew that.

Rebooting: .001%

It would take a while for that to- for him to finish rebooting.

“I know you’re not a morning person, Uno, but taking that long to wake up is a bit excessive!” He told the system, feeling laughter bubbling in his throat. “I’ll let you get yourself together!”

And he left. Walked back out of the strange building, faster than the way in. Out into the ring around it, where Fenton was waving at him.

“I thought it would be trickier than that!” He said when Donald got close. “I’m glad you got through, we should get back and take a look.”

“Are you sure that’s it?” Donald couldn’t help but ask, glancing backwards.

“Well, if not, we’ll come back in and check!”

And then they were back in the real Tower, the headset coming off; Panchito's hands were clasped around Donald's, and José just a step away with a smile.

Donald clutched at the hands in his, and looked up at the monitor.

Rebooting: .001%

It was real. Donald slumped back in his seat, smiling.

"He's gonna like you guys," he told the ceiling. "And I think we should introduce Uno and Boyd."

"I bet he'd like that!" Gizmo agreed cheerfully, from where he was reading over the smaller monitor. "Everything looks good, PK, but if you don't mind I'd like to keep an eye on things for a bit? Just to make sure nothing comes up."

"Sure," Donald said, far more casually than he felt. "I can stay for a while. Or… not?" He continued, when José made a face.

"Your phone went off while you were in the system," he said cautiously. "We didn't open the messages, but there were a few in a row."

Phooey. Donald dug out his phone, frowning.

A few from the kids, just letting him know they were having fun on their Bigfoot hunt and were excited to see him soon. Which was sweet,

and comforting, and also a few hours old.

At the *top,* three texts from a group chat.

KH Updates

Mickey: 👑🗝️

Mickey: ten minutes!

Goofy: see ya there!

Fuck.

They were eight minutes old.

Fuck.

“I- I need to go!” Donald half shouted, darting out of his seat, only to stop. Where could he *go?* If he ducked into a closet or side room, they were going to eventually check on him! But he couldn’t just leave, this building was crawling with people, and he didn’t have time to get to his car!

Maybe the roof? But what if someone saw him?

He wavered, ignoring the eyes on him, trying to think. He didn't know what to do, he didn't have *time!*

Fuck this. Fuck it all.

"Okay, a portal is about to open," he said, and he sounded manic to his ears, "don't worry about it, it's fine, just do *not* go through it, okay? I'll be back in a few hours. Maximum of a day or two. Please just stay here."

"D- PK?" Panchito asked slowly. "What is this portal?"

"Can't tell you for magic secrecy reasons, just *please* don't worry about it and wait here!"

"But-"

Time was up. Donald felt the tug in his navel just before it opened. First the light, just shining on the ground like the sun, but only through a keyhole. Then the slow creaking of a door opening, and Donald knew if he didn't choose to walk through, he would be dragged. No real choice, only the semblance of dignity.

"I promise I'll be back soon, but I really have to go!" He insisted, walking backwards so he could see them all. José and Panchito, trailing after him with concern and he *really* should have found time to explain this; Gizmo behind, watching with concern but not following. And above them, Uno's screen. Rebooting. He would be back soon enough, Donald had to be patient.

It *really* sucked that he would be gone for months and next to no time

would pass here; he wanted to speed up Uno's recovery, not have to wait *longer!* But at least- at least it was started.

"I'll be home soon," he promised, watching the other Cabs with a smile. He was so tired. "I swear, I'll be back before you know it."

And he stepped backwards into Disney Castle.

The World is far Larger and far Smaller than You can Imagine

Donald huffed a breath, and darted to the side. Sora had gone off earlier to try and find Hercules after being separated in the chaos, and he was nowhere near them now, he had to find the kid before he got himself *killed-*

He would be fine. Donald knew that. He was the Keyblade wielder after all, and these were just basic Heartless. Nothing they couldn't handle, even if the Titans were also running around. Those were more Hercules' problems, they just needed to assist.

Well, the others could assist. Donald hadn't been able to find a shop yet to replace his last mage staff, and this one was getting long in the tooth; he didn't even know if it would survive the battle, let alone long enough for them to get back to somewhere that he could restock. He was trying to stretch what he had left, running and bashing things with the staff instead of casting spells, but even so, he was worried. If they faced something bigger than these things…

Donald cursed in his mind once again that so few planets here had oceans. Even a *lake* or a *river* would help, but nooo, each world here was so bizarrely isolated that most of them barely had a complete ecosystem, let alone multiple, and fewer still had water features available to use.

Though he'd admit he was nervous to try using a foreign ocean, especially here; who knew if there was a god or spirit around that might take offense.

He and Goofy had only just missed Mickey when they'd arrived at Disney, before being shuttled over to Sora and then jetting off to the next part of the adventure. He'd had time to ensure his clothing had

transformed as expected and that had been it- they hadn't even made a supply stop yet.

His staff sputtered in his hands, a warning it was getting close to running out of power. He really should stock up on the things, but every time he did, the Moogles had a better option available when they got to the next shop, and it was hard to continually justify spending the Munny when he could usually limp it along anyway. They needed that for potions.

Maybe if he wasn't such a lousy Healer…

No time for that thought, he had to move or he'd get pinned down in the rubble. Huge blocks of stone rained down from above, crushed under the heels of the Cyclopes set on destroying the city they were hunkered down in. Donald hadn't heard anyone name it, but he would eat his hat if it wasn't Thebes.

It was a city made for tragedy, after all.

A sliver of stone cut his cheek.

"Donald!" Hercules appeared out of the hazy gloom, throwing the Titan's foot out of the building; he landed a few blocks away, groaning. "Where's Sora?"

"He was supposed to be with *you!"* Donald yelled back, frustrated. He hated having a kid out here; he knew Sora was well trained, had *helped train him,* but he couldn't help but hate the fact that the fate of the world, of several worlds, rested on the shoulders of a few teenagers. Couldn't the keyblades choose adults? The Disney summoning spell had no issue finding grown people to throw into this endless war!

“He must’ve ended up on Mount Olympus! Come on, we can head that way!”

“Wait, have you seen Goofy?” Donald protested, while Herc went to *pick him up,* god he hated this place, he wasn’t that short! By Duckburg standards at least!

“He was on his way up the mountain!” Hercules told him, reaching again; Donald was about to *bite* him if he tried, hopping away. “We need to hurry!”

“We’ll be able to go faster,” Donald growled, “if you’re not using your *sword* hand to carry me! I’ll keep up, just go!”

Hercules hesitated for another moment before nodding and starting to run- ah, right. *Mount* Olympus. Great, they’d have to climb it, wouldn’t they? God he hated those damn stairs, couldn’t gods create an elevator? The World Tree had one!

Donald ran after him, guarding their backs; or, really just his. Hercules had that heroic glow that meant he was going to be nearly impervious to any damage. Which should reasonably leave Donald just protecting himself and not *worrying* about the young demigod, but instead it made him *more* paranoid. Storkules knew war, had fought plenty and knew when his powers would and wouldn’t defend him. Hercules was still so *young,* he wasn’t even a full god yet.

He would be. Donald knew the story. Sometimes it took a few years, even an entire lifetime, but eventually Hercules would be the god of Heroes, and live on Mount Olympus with the rest of his brethren. His destiny was written into the fabric of this reality. Donald did wonder about Megara; he hoped her fate was kinder here.

But right now, he could feel the fledgling god's power brushing against his senses, where the scarred and aching remains of his innate magic remained; the Blot's weapons took *all* latent magic from a person, their ability to process it and left nothing but pain and burning emptiness behind. Just Donald's luck that he'd also had Storkules blessing living in him when he'd been shot.

He could still remember the horror on Storkules face when he'd screamed in pain at a mere shoulder pat; the proximity had hurt already, but *physical contact…*

Donald had tried to lie, to cover up his reaction, and he thought his friend bought it. Returned to his bombastic personality and his all-encompassing embraces, but at times, it was pretty clear that he hadn't really believed Donald. That they were both trying to pretend that things were normal.

It was obvious, really. Storkules had never offered to put the blessing *back,* after all.

A Heartless screeched at him, trying to cut between him and Hercules; Donald skipped magic entirely and punched the thing hard enough that it burst into a cloud of dark fog.

Two more, which he struck with the head of the staff; it fizzled when it hit, dispersing a random cloud of sparks into the air. More wasted magic; it wouldn't last more than a spell or two at this rate. The crystal was actually *cracked;* just a hairline fissure, but with magic that was all it needed; it was leaking what little magic remained, and he didn't have a way of fixing it-

He saw another Heartless aiming for Hercules' back, while the hero

continued running along like he didn't even *need* to defend himself-

" *Thundaga!"*

The blast knocked the thing into pieces.

And the staff in his hands shattered into more.

"Phooey," Donald grumbled, tossing the remains of the handle aside. No use lugging it around; magic items got brittle once the magic was drained.

"Whew, thanks- uh, is that your staff?" Hercules asked, turning to look back and frowning. "Are you going to be alright without it?"

"I'll be fine," Donald grumbled, shaking his head. "Just focus on getting us back to the others."

They kept moving, but now Hercules was watching Donald closely, clearly aiming to defend him if they encountered another Heartless. Nice of him, but he still wasn't watching his *own* back, and Donald was getting distracted worrying about it.

Another Heartless. Hercules took it out without issue, but kept looking *back-*

"Hercules. I will be *fine."* Donald growled, glaring. "Will you *please* just focus on yourself?"

“I- you’re completely unarmed, it’s my job as a hero to-”

“Your job as a hero is to assess the larger threat, which is currently *not* me! I’m not in any immediate danger, and you have *Titans* attacking Mount Olympus!” Donald screamed, rage bubbling to the surface. “For fucks sake kid, focus!”

Hercules snapped upright at that, clearly instinctively, before hesitating again. Donald remedied the issue by running ahead of him instead, since the mountain was right in front of them; it wasn’t exactly hard to find.

“Wait, wait! Just let me-”

Donald didn’t bother slowing down. Hercules was faster than him either way, so any head start Donald could get would only last a few minutes anyway.

“Donald, *wait-”*

He reached the edge of town, where the Cyclopes was still lying, stunned. He could hear the footsteps behind him, didn’t hesitate to run past the body.

A mistake, as it turned out. The Cyclopes’ eye opened as Donald ran past it, visibly bleary. It didn’t react to Donald, but the pupil widened with recognition when Hercules passed it, and it swatted him into a nearby building.

“Herc!” Donald shouted, veering off, as the Cyclopes stood and laughed, reaching for Hercules again.

His staff was shattered, he had no power, there was no ocean close enough for him to focus on and *Hercules wasn’t moving-*

Donald reached. It burned and ached and screamed along his bones-

Storkules smiled, before kissing Donald’s brow; his face was so warm. *“The Hero’s Blessing, Donald.”*

Donald grit his beak and hissed the words along with his memory:

“May you always have the strength of heart,” his voice broke as the power *leapt* to his skin, and a blade to his hands, “to do what must be done.”

The Caballeros sword settled in his palm, the helm on his head, and he leapt at the Cyclopes with a roar that echoed against the stones.

Hercules let out a confused noise; Donald ignored it as the Cyclopes turned to face Donald with a frown. He looked between them for a moment, clearly baffled, before he tentatively reached for Donald instead.

Donald leapt back, and back again, drawing the Titan away from the downed hero, who was slowly rolling up onto his knees and staring. Back. Swipe the sword and the Cyclopes’ reaching fingers, drawing blood and an enraged screech from the other. Back and to the side, there was rubble under his feet that let him get higher, higher still, until he was on the roof of the building, and he jumped forward,

landing on the thing's arm and running up to the shoulder, hoping to get this over with quickly-

"Donald!" Hercules shouted, and the Cyclopes turned to look around again. Donald didn't think it could see terribly well, and was likely baffled by the changing voices and the glow emanating from Donald's feathers. Hercules' heroic glow.

Donald stumbled, tried to keep a grip on the thick arm hair as the Titan turned, shaking his arm violently. He stabbed the sword into the flesh, drawing out another scream of rage and pain, and used it to cling on while the Titan thrashed, too confused to try and knock him off directly.

Using the sword to stabilize himself, he got a better grip on the hair and pulled the blade loose and started to climb again.

His body, his skin, even his blood was *burning,* ripping open the scars he'd spent nearly two decades ignoring. He'd always suspected those scars hadn't healed well, had ignored how tender and pained they were at even the barest hint of non-elemental magic. How being near Storkules still hurt.

He reached the shoulder. The thick, corded neck stood out in front of him. Below, Hercules was shouting again; trying to draw the Cyclopes attention? Donald didn't know, or care, he had to focus on not losing his footing as the Titan swung around to follow the shouting. It seemed to have forgotten Donald was there.

He stumbled forward, using the Cyclopes movements to balance himself out, staggering forward with the blade gleaming in his hand. The weight was a welcome balance, the helm a protective remembrance of another battle. A giant, glowing with dark power, the world collapsing under their feet and the glow of ancestors' protection

around him like armor.

Donald took a breath. Eyed the throat in front of him, the thick muscle and throbbing veins, as thick as his own arms.

Hefted the sword, and dove forward.

The blade slid through flesh like butter.

He tumbled to the ground, rolling to avoid breaking anything and let the heroic power flow away from him with a pained hiss. The glow faded. His hands ached, the electrocuted one still tingling; it hadn't properly healed from the cells under the theatre, but he had nobody he could ask to take a better look at it. Maybe now that he was here…

Everything burned. He could feel the echo of clawing pain from the volcanic spirit's escape attempt. The ripped and shredded scars from the Phantom Blot. He swore he could smell the rot from the dryad's corpse. His mouth tasted of salt and iron and decay, and he retched. Nothing came up besides bile, and he spat several times trying to clear his beak.

"Donald! Are you, uh- you alright?" Hercules asked, dodging around the body and the gushing red river to help him up.

"Ugh," Donald declared, shaking out his hands; he was still holding the Caballero sword. He eyed it thoughtfully. It wasn't designed with Heartless in mind, wouldn't be as helpful as a weapon from here, but maybe he should keep it out…?

No, no, if he did then Sora would ask about it, and the World Order

spell would activate. He really didn't want to deal with that. Best not to risk it. He put the blade away, already missing the weight of it in his hands.

"Shouldn't you keep that…?" Hercules asked hesitantly; he looked a bit peaky. Possibly because Donald had just been sharing a power base, and he wasn't actually a full god yet; he had no idea what that might have done, honestly.

It just needed to be done.

"Nah, it's not too useful for anything else," Donald spat out, focusing on 'not made for Heartless' so he could bypass the spell. "Bout as useful as that broken staff, honestly."

"Ah, well, it helped with the Cyclopes?" Herc tried, glancing at the body; the blood steamed where it landed, soaking into the ground and stones. Not as much as Donald might have expected, considering its sheer size.

He tried to remember what Titan Cyclopes were associated with; Thebes was probably going to get hit by magical backlash from it, if the relevant god didn't tidy up. He knew some of them were sons of Poseidon, but this was a *Titan,* not a demigod, so that didn't seem likely. Foresight, maybe?

He should warn the King before they left, just in case. Ly-something, hadn't it been?

"So, uh, what was that?" Hercules asked, while Donald shook off his thoughts and started back up the mountain.

“What was what?”

“The, um, glowy thing? I’ve only seen that from my dad, and me a few times, honestly, and, well- you’re not a god! … are you?”

Donald snorted, almost choking on his laughter.

“No! Gods no, I’m not- it’s just magic, Herc, sometimes it comes with a light show,” Donald explained, shaking his head.

“But *that* one felt different than the usual magic you use,” Hercules insisted.

“It was different magic,” Donald said carefully. “I wasn’t using my staff, that’s all.”

“Oh…”

Long moment of silence as they climbed; it was oddly quiet now, with the Cyclopes gone, and the other Titans far enough up the mountain to only be heard through dim echoes.

“Why not do that all of the time, though?” Herc asked. Donald sighed. “I just mean- it seemed more powerful?”

It was, by a long margin. Directly from the source, not filtered through the Moogle that had created the staff Donald used, already weakened by being second hand, then weakened again based on the crystal it was made from. They were element specific, and if he didn’t choose

the right spells to match with them, they were feeble, or broke under pressure.

Yen Sid had told him once it would be better if *he* made the staff, at least. Like Magica's amulet, it would be more powerful if Donald had at least provided the magic into it. But elements couldn't be trapped in something as small as a crystal. Not the ones Donald used.

Even the volcano had taken a gem the size of an egg, and that had been *one* volcano. Donald's elemental connections were a touch more intense, and even less interested in the idea of being harvested. Volcanoes were still earth, at the end of the day, and earth was an element of growth and help. The ocean would drown you without hesitation.

Even someone that it loved; the ocean's love was possessive and cold.

"Not every situation calls for it," he said vaguely, because it occurred to him that even explaining what heroic magic *was* might be a bad idea. Hercules hadn't taken up the mantle yet, here. Donald didn't need to interfere with his destiny.

"But what-"

"Hercules." Donald said. "Herc. Not every situation calls for it. Let's just leave it there."

Thankfully, they were attacked by Heartless again, and Donald managed to get swept up in the attack (he just started punching the things; sure it wasn't as effective, but it kept them away from him) and separated from Hercules as he fought…

Well. When Donald had said he'd have to face his destiny eventually he hadn't really thought it would be *today,* but what the hell, why not. So Hercules had now faced all the Titans, claimed his godhood for a few minutes, then decided to not become a god because he loved Megara too much to leave her behind.

Donald had to wonder why none of the gods offered her immortality to fix *that,* but it wasn't like that had worked in any story he'd heard, so probably for the best.

He did think Herc was probably doomed to eventually retake his mantle, but he wished him well anyway when they were leaving. A mortal life with the woman he loved was a kinder fate for both of them, even if it was temporary.

It *did* mean that Hercules, having used his latent godhood for a few minutes, was now *aware* of exactly what Donald had been doing a few hours ago. At least based on his thoughtful looks sent Donald's way. Thankfully he didn't say anything, but Donald was sweating bullets the entire time they were wrapping up, as Sora got some guidance on strength coming from the heart and *clearly* didn't get it-

He had no idea why they'd thought anything else would happen. Sora had heard variations of that literal heartfelt message in every corner of the universe, and he never got it until he came to the conclusion himself. Donald didn't think anyone had ever heard 'true strength comes from within' without having to puzzle over it until they'd reformed the message to suit their own lives. It wasn't the kind of thing you could just tell someone.

It was something you had to *learn.*

Despite that, Sora seemed hopeful, and with the crisis over it was time for them to leave.

On the streets of Thebes, the Cyclopes corpse melted into golden light; amongst the gods and Titans, death was only permanent when Death willed it.

It never *ended* here. Sora, apparently, contained the hearts of several people. Roxas at least made sense, he'd been an autonomous person, not an extension of Sora even if everyone else thought of him as such for a while, so him still existing was at least understandable.

Insane, but reasonable for this place; what did it say about his life that he missed the simplicity of chasing the Phantom Blot? Or the Evronians, at least they only had the one goal!

But okay. Roxas. Fair enough. Kid deserved his own life anyway. Axel (or Lea, he didn't seem able to choose yet) would be happy to see him, and Sora had never been comfortable with the fact that Roxas had vanished to let Sora wake back up, so- that was a good plan. Wake Roxas, get him his own body, perfect.

Then there was the *other* one. Because apparently Sora had been carting around the Heart of another person entirely since childhood. Sure, why not. That made sense.

When he said Sora had a big heart, he hadn't meant it *literally*-

Alright, so a lost Keyblade Master named Ventus was also hanging around, and that might have caused all manner of weird things about Sora, Kairi and Riku's childhoods honestly, but hey, another ally, if they could figure out how to wake him up-

No, they needed to find *another* missing Keyblade wielder first. Because she was the one that hid Ventus' body. Which they needed, so they could wake up Ventus.

And there was a *third* Heart in there that nobody knew the identity of yet-

Yen Sid insisted they needed seven Keyblade wielders. Seven lights against thirteen darkness. Some kind of prophecy, Donald assumed, he didn't bother asking. Yen Sid wouldn't answer him if he did anyway.

But. *Thirteen.* Shouldn't they have been told this when Organization XIII was getting started?! Clearly *that* was the reason for their numbers! They could have been recruiting *before* they faced the Organization, instead of being so far behind that Xehanort already had most of his army rebuilt before they even started looking for two (or three…? Who was Terra?) missing Keyblade Masters that, hey! Maybe could have helped in the last few battles!

Sure, they'd all survived, but *Sora and Riku were children.*

He was so sick of worlds that insisted on depending on children to save them instead of having the adults that had created the issues take responsibility in fixing the messes they'd created. Gods forbid they do *that,* but nooo, the light of children or some such garbage.

Donald had met adults full of the light and hope they needed here; Fenton and Launchpad sprung to mind immediately. Storkules, too. And children were full of light and hope because they were *young.* Because they lacked experiences that had jaded them. There were plenty of children deprived of that innocence early on, that could arguably be called jaded and mature.

Lena came to mind. She was a child and she *deserved* to be light and hopeful. Innocent. But he couldn't take her life experiences away from her and pretend she was going to have that; he could only help make sure the rest of her life could have the joy she'd missed out on.

And yet here he was, letting more children fight in a war that was going to ruin them. Was going to force that maturity and adulthood onto them early, because this universe was convinced that that was the only way to save them all. And because of the damned spells that tied Donald here, he could do nothing else.

Follow the Keyblade, and assist in whatever they need.

Thanks Mickey, Donald grumbled to himself, as he flew them through another cluster of stars, gently buffeted by the distant waves of gravitational pulls too weak to do much more. Thanks so much, for bringing them here, and putting them in a position where they could only really watch. Forced them, him and Goofy, to participate or leave a child to fight in a war alone instead.

He could still remember Sora's face when they'd left him in Hollow Bastion. *Follow the Keyblade,* they'd been told, Ordered, and follow they did.

He hated magic, sometimes. How it was bound to his soul, how he had to follow orders he hated, do things he was opposed to, and couldn't even really explain why. Just left a child alone in a foreign place, because the Keyblade changed course temporarily and they were tied to its' fate.

Mickey had taken back that order, at least, after. Or it had gone away when they'd been transported home temporarily; Donald's memories of the time Roxas was active were stilted and vague. He knew they'd fought and lost memories with Naminé , and been in some kind of

suspended animation for a while, but he was also certain he'd gone *home* somewhere in the middle of all of it. But maybe he'd dreamed it.

He sighed, leaned back in his chair, and watched the stars drift slowly by. If he let himself, he could almost feel like he was sailing at night, with the stars to guide him and the waves to lead the way.

Interlude: Panchito and the Fire Twins

Panchito walked through the pleasant woods, with birds singing and sunlight flickering through the leaves, and worried.

He'd landed alone in the woods. No José. No Donald. His amulet felt dead against his chest. The sun felt odd here; he could reach it, could let its light and warmth flit through his fingers, but it was different. Newer, maybe. Confused, like it didn't know what was happening when he let the warmth travel through his veins. It understood life, and warmth, and heat, but not living creatures. Nothing like him.

So strange.

Donald had talked of other dimensions once, years and years ago, back when they'd been students and Caballeros, Xandra lying on the couch speaking of distant lands. He talked of strange planets and other worlds. Never in detail, and he usually blamed Scrooge if pressed. This, then, was probably another one.

Donald's face haunted him. Terrified. Nervous. Desperate.

He looked like that often, lately. Like he was worried that they would be hurt.

That *he* would hurt them, silly as that idea was. They were the Caballeros! There was nothing they couldn't handle!

… he'd looked like that in college, too. Whenever his family was mentioned, when an adventure went dangerous and they faced great odds. He looked at them, at José and the girls and Panchito like he

thought they were all about to be hurt, and it was because of him.

But they would be fine. They were stronger together!

They just needed to *be* together.

Which meant he needed to find the others.

He and José had leapt through the portal, handing their egg to Gizmoduck with a desperate plea to watch them for a moment, but something had gone screwy, he'd felt something shift, like a horse about to buck, and he and José had been hurled off course.

He hoped José had landed somewhere safe; this forest was empty, but calm; José would like it. He might just be somewhere else in the woods, even!

But the amulet was quiet. If he was also in these woods, it meant that he was still very, very far away.

Donald he assumed was wherever the most danger was. A battle, or a typhoon; he'd clearly known what was happening. Where he was going. He had probably ended up where he needed to be, wherever that was.

Panchito kept walking. The woods continued to sing with birdsong.

He could hear speech. Someone, no, two someones, were speaking. Not loud, practically a whisper, but when it had been so *quiet* before, the voices stood out.

He raced forward, stopping on the edge of a clearing that peered over a cliff. A beautiful view of the sunset, the sun singing its end with cheer; it was a young sun, so young. The light was warm on his face, and he took a brief moment to breathe it in.

Then he looked closer, and saw the two people.

They were… mammals? No feathers, only fur on the top of the head, clothed head to toe. One with long red spiky fur (or was it hair?), the other with a shorter red bob. They were both staring at him in surprise. Panchito smiled widely, waved, and bound forward a few steps.

They both shifted, like they planned to attack, and he stopped, holding his hands out wide in a greeting that also showed he was not holding a weapon.

“Hola!” He called, hoping he sounded friendly to them, “I appear to be very lost!”

The taller one, with the spikes, snorted a laugh.

“You got that right, pal,” he said. He didn’t relax his ready stance, but the younger one did, smiling.

“Yeah, this is a special training dimension, you shouldn’t be able to get… in?” She said, trailing off when the taller one elbowed her

subtly. Or at least tried; he was so much taller than her that he jostled her rather badly when he did so, and she stuck her tongue out at him.

Siblings, perhaps? Panchito laughed, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Ah, I didn’t mean to! You see, I was trying to follow my two partners- I don’t suppose you’ve seen them? A green parrot in a yellow jacket, or a white duck in a blue shirt?”

Wait, no, Donald had been in his Paperinik costume- Panchito opened his beak to correct himself, but the girl’s eyes lit up.

“Oh, do you mean Donald?” She asked, while the taller man groaned and Panchito nodded frantically.

“Yes, yes, Donal’! He was summoned for a mission, yes? We got separated!” He explained, and now he strode a bit closer, since the girl was less tense and her companion clearly more annoyed than defensive now. “I am Panchito! What are your names?”

“Oh, I’m Kairi! And this is Axel,” she said, gesturing to her companion. “Donald was traveling with Sora, last we heard; we can ask Merlin to send a message!”

Merlin? Panchito opened his beak to say he knew Merlin, before he paused, frowning. Something felt strange about that. How would Merlin be here *and* teaching April?

“I might know him!” He said anyway, in case he was being foolish. “Or, I know an owl named Merlin! He is a wizard, yes?”

“Well, he *is* a wizard,” Kairi said thoughtfully.

“But he’s human, so I don’t think he’s your guy,” Axel finished for her, frowning down at them. Panchito wasn’t used to being *this* much shorter than everyone; this must be how José felt!

“Perhaps Merlin is a wizard nickname!” He suggested, as Kairi started to lead the way elsewhere. She giggled.

He looked the pair over. Now that he’d gotten used to their strange appearances, he couldn’t help but notice they were covered in zippers. So many of them! Surely their clothing didn’t need so many?

But it did look cool; perhaps he should get a few.

“So how do you and Donald know each other?” Kairi asked. “I don’t think he’s mentioned a Panchito or José…”

“We met at school!” Panchito said cheerfully. “A fated meeting! And Donal’ often doesn’t like to talk about personal things at work, that is no surprise!”

Donald’s work as a spy, anyway. But Panchito was following Donald’s advice about strange dimensions and timelines: don’t tell people things unless you had to.

“It messes with timelines, it makes a mess with multiple dimensions- keep it vague and really simple!”

Panchito could do that!

“So, is he that angry when he’s not, ah, working?” Axel asked casually, eyeing Panchito from where he was trailing next to them. Panchito laughed.

“He is very passionate, yes! But he is not always *angry,* that is saved for when he is worried!” Simple, keep it simple…

“Worried?” Kairi asked now, glancing over.

“Oh, yes, he worries. About keeping people safe, mostly,” Panchito explained, and this was harder than expected; usually he was allowed to gush about Donald when asked! “He, ah, he worries he cannot always protect people, and this makes him angry and ready to fight, you see?”

“Huh.” Axel sounded surprised; Panchito was not. People didn’t always understand his Donald, and they assumed many things about his temper. “So you know each other that well?”

“Si, we do.” He said. "I am glad Donal' has friends here, too. We worry, José and I."

“Oh, right, your other friend! Well, I’m sure we can find him when we get back to the others! We’re in a place where time isn’t really real, to train! So we don’t get a lot of news here,” Kairi said thoughtfully. “Maybe they already found him!”

“Maybe! That would be good, I will admit to being worried about being apart,” he told her, smiling.

“Yeah, I understand. Me and my friends, we’ve been apart a lot the last few years…” she replied. “That’s why I’m training! So that next time I’ll be with them, instead of waiting!”

“You are stronger together,” Panchito agreed with a nod. “I am sure you will become very strong! The strongest!”

She giggled again. Axel, Panchito noticed, had relaxed somewhat, but he still looked tense and uncomfortable. Was it Panchito? Or just in general?

“Me, I’m trying to make up for… past mistakes,” he said, mostly to himself. Kairi sighed, and slid sideways so she could hug him with one arm as they continued walking.

“You have nothing to make up for,” she insisted, but even Panchito could tell he didn’t believe her.

“Yeah, well, I also want to see Roxas again, so,” he said with a huffed laugh, “might as well join the team trying to do that, right?”

Kairi giggled. Panchito nodded, since that did make sense to him.

“So, met at school, yeah? You a mage too?” Axel asked, peering down at him.

Did Donald go to a mage school at some point? Or was Axel just assuming- wait, was Donald a mage here?

"I have some talent, but nowhere as much as José or Donald!" He landed on, letting a small ball of flame flit around his upraised hand as a quick demonstration. Both their eyes followed the light with interest.

"You don't have to say a spell?" Kairi asked. "Merlin always does!"

"Ah, there are different styles of doing magic!" Panchito told her. "Some are more, mmm, formal! I am not so much."

He probably should not mention elemental magic; it tended to be a touchy subject with trained wizards. Something something could destroy the world.

Bah! He was friends with the sun! It would not try to harm him, it liked him!

At least it would *warn* him if he was doing something it didn't like. And it had helped him create their egg; Panchito was fine with going where it guided him.

"That looks different from my fire," Axel mused; he flicked his hand, and a ball of flames hovered in his palm. "Interesting."

Panchito hopped forward with interest, peering at the flames. They were darker than his own; not colder, exactly, not less powerful. Darker energy source, perhaps? There were few things lighter than the sun.

“We are twins!” He declared loudly, crowing. “We even have the same fantastic hair, see?”

He gestured to his comb; Kairi laughed loudly at that, tugging on the ends of Axel’s long spikes. He looked put out, but it was the kind of fond annoyance that came with being an older sibling, Panchito thought.

“If you say so, little guy,” Axel replied with a huff. Panchito laughed.

“I am actually fairly tall, for my species!” he said cheerfully. “You are just very large!”

He looked put out by that, for some reason.

Merlin was also a fleshy primate, not an owl. He was nicer than the wizard that Panchito knew, which he didn’t say.

He was also intrigued by the idea of Panchito knowing another Merlin, stroking his rather magnificent beard.

“Another Merlin, you say…” he mused. “I don’t suppose you met an Arthur, with him?”

Panchito nodded before he remembered he was supposed to be *vague*.

“Si, yes! He is a lion!”

“A *lion?”*

Oops. How did Donald manage this?

Thankfully Merlin was more concerned with how Panchito had gotten into his strange dimension, since apparently it was supposed to be protected from outside people getting in. And Panchito had no answers, as he’d simply jumped in after Donald when the portal opened (Merlin seemed confused about the portal too!), so the only solution was clearly to find Donald and ask!

And Kairi and Axel were finished training, so they would be going too! Since, apparently, time was strange where he was, it was possible that it had only been a few hours for Donald at most, while he was certain he’d been in the woods for far longer. He hadn’t gotten hungry, though; was that something that was meant to happen in a place removed from time?

And the question of where José had landed was still an issue, unless he was somewhere else in the woods. Merlin was checking now, while Kairi and Axel faced off in the ring one last time before they leapt into the true fight.

A fight that Panchito still hadn’t asked about. A war that Donald was right in the center of, and one that his partners should probably at least know of.

Not for the first time, Panchito regretted how afraid Donald was of sharing burdens. He could say resented it, if he was feeling vindictive; did Donald not realize how much added stress they carried, wondering what he was doing now, what danger was he in today?

But no, he couldn't resent it. Donald was a protector, and his greatest fear was that one day, someone he loved, someone he was supposed to keep safe, would be hurt by something Donald could have prevented. And Donald was convinced he could prevent many, many things.

José was better at arguing with him. With pointing out that knowing about the danger made it less dangerous, that a burden shared was a burden halved and whatnot. That they were there for him, and if what he needed was for them to stand back or go away so he didn't have to focus on protecting them…

Well. Perhaps he did have a point. Panchito was here, after all. And if the way these two were fighting was any indication, it was a dangerous place indeed.

But they were the Three Caballeros! And Donald worried too much about protecting others; he struggled to just worry about himself. He didn't need more people to worry about, but he *did* need people to worry about *him*.

And that was what José and Panchito were here to do! Donald needed people at his back, not to hide but to protect, and they three were stronger together.

The magic that Kairi and Axel used was interesting. It seemed to come from their odd weapons (keyblades, apparently!), but also from inside them. Not like a wand or a staff, which could channel power from the person holding it, but like they and the blade were one and the same. Panchito had never seen anything like it before!

He wished José was here; he would find this new magic fascinating, Panchito was certain of it. He would have to ask if these two could give a demonstration when they found him.

Panchito tapped on his amulet.

There was no answer.

Interlude: José: The Absense of Light

José wandered in the dark.

The darkness was a physical thing; heavy, yet cold, a foggy feeling of walking in the shadows of something too large to fathom. There was nothing to see, no landmark to choose; he could be walking in circles. Perhaps he should have stayed where he had landed, to make finding him easier.

But who would search for him here? There was nothing. If not for the ground beneath his feet, he might have thought that he was simply floating in space, that nothing was real.

This was not the shadow realm, a place he was familiar with. This was something else. Something *less,* like everything had been taken from this place. Even shadows.

After all, even the darkest shadows needed the light to take form.

He clutched his amulet. It was powerless right now. He felt cut off from everything; his partners, the sun, the world in general.

Where was he?

Where were the others?

He hoped they were somewhere safe. Donald had seemed to know what was happening, so surely he wasn't in this gloomy place. He was

too loud for this kind of place, too big; the nothing would retreat in the face of his sheer existence. And Panchito was so bright, he couldn't be dimmed.

José felt dim. And small, and cold. The nothing ate at his heels as he walked; he felt certain that if he looked down, he'd find that his feet were slowly fading away in the dark.

He kept walking. He hummed under his breath, trying to fill the strangely muffled silence with noise.

There were occasional chittering noises around him. Like there were small creatures in the darkness, watching him. Waiting. It made his shoulders tighten.

He hummed louder. Sang, when his beak would open. Whistled, to hear it go on and on and on into the vast space around him.

The ground didn't feel quite right. It was soft, like he was walking on dust, but somehow hard, and had no give. His feet barely processed he was standing on anything at all. Like the ground only existed because it had to, and didn't have any other traits to speak of because those would be more work. The absolute minimum.

Like the light here. Because he *could* see. At least, he could look down and make out his own form. But there was no light. Or, maybe there was just nothing to see. The horizon blending the ground and sky into each other. Occasionally he thought he saw faint shapes in the distance, spires and castles and mountains, but they faded from view when he looked too closely, and he was afraid if he turned at all he would be going nowhere.

He was afraid he might be doing that anyway. Would he even know?

He could be standing in place, even, the soft terrain disguising that he was simply slipping and sliding without making any progress.

Then, a sound. One he could barely hear, over his humming and the chittering and the emptiness that seemed to eat any other noise. The faintest sound of shifting rocks and water.

Waves on a beach. José whipped around, trying to- there! He started towards it, the sound getting just a hint louder, and louder still, until he could hear it properly, the spray and sand drowning out the chittering and nothing. He blinked, and it was like he could see properly now; there was a faint glimmer in front of him where the smallest amount of light touched the waves.

Ocean. It was an ocean.

It sounded like home. He took a deep breath, but there was no smell. No sound of seagulls or wind. But- this was a *something,* water and movement in the nothing he'd been in for… he didn't know how long.

He'd forgotten why he was even walking, he realized. Had forgotten that Donald and Panchito would be looking for him. They *would,* he just needed to wait it out, and where better to wait for Donald than the sea? All he needed to do was fill the silence with music, sit by the waves, and they were sure to find him.

Or perhaps, with some rest and focus on something real, instead of the gloom around them that wasn't, he could find a solution himself.

He sat, just shy of the waves, and breathed. The air still smelled of nothing, but with the water at his feet he could pretend.

José still couldn't quite muster the energy to play a song, but he could hum at least, and draw small pictures in the sand before the waves rubbed them away. Tiny Donalds riding hot air balloons and Panchitos with guitars and horns. Zico and Zeca running from their angry mother. Birds in flight, fish swimming.

Dozens of ideas of what their egg might hatch into. Would they look like the original soul reborn? A combination of himself, Donald and Panchito? A firebird, like Donald thought?

He hoped they wouldn't miss the hatching. Donald had said he'd be back quickly; maybe it hadn't been that long. Maybe the darkness was only making it feel like he'd been here for days. Weeks. Months. Like time was sliding past without him, and it was longer and longer than he could truly understand.

It was his imagination. It was easy to feel like time wasn't moving correctly when there was nothing around to compare to. The only thing he could tell was there was this beach, and the water.

He didn't think it would be wise to touch it. The water. Some instinct told him it wasn't as refreshing as he might like, and he would heed that warning. Something about the sound of water on sand was off, like the water was too thick or the sand too thin.

Donald would know, he thought. He was so in-tune with the ocean it was still amazing to José. Panchito was bonded with the sun, talking about it like a friend, but Donald seemed to almost *be* the ocean. At times José worried he might simply wash away, nothing but salt and seafoam.

José, he wasn't as close to his. Air was the one that called to him, but he often felt like he was almost an afterthought. Like the third element needed to go to someone, and he was the one available. Donald had taught them both about how his own magic worked, and they'd tried it out, found a niche that worked, but while Panchito and the sun had connected like it was meant to be, José had simply drifted into his own connection. It certainly never felt like how the other two spoke of their magic.

Panchito retained the separation by thinking of the sun like a friend, but a far away one. One he could lean on for some help or advice, but couldn't be touched.

Donald had a whole complex thought process, of being a ship at sea to anchor him to himself. José, though, he'd never truly struggled to stay apart from the air. Never felt it close in on him, filling his lungs like the salt of the sea Donald complained about being on his tongue. The opposite, honestly, it felt like he could never quite grasp it for more than a moment.

The last time he'd held the air in his hands, he'd been falling from a plane, no parachute and nothing to grab hold of. Then, and only then, had he truly *flown*.

Flying in an airplane was nowhere near the same thing, but it was the closest he could manage. It let him travel, and when they were streaking above the clouds he could almost grasp that same immersion he'd felt in freefall.

He reached for the air here, more for something to do than with any true goal in mind, and the reaction was sluggish and unpleasant; the air almost felt sick. Not like smoke, but something heavy. He dropped his hand.

The air was so *flighty,* he thought, and felt a startled chuckle leave his beak. Panchito would like that one, he would have to try to remember it when they found him.

They would find him. Or he would get his bearings and find *them.* The beach looked walkable, maybe he could follow it and find something…? It was the only landmark he'd found while he'd been here, and surely if Donald came here it would be the first thing he would gravitate towards.

It was hard to find the energy to move, though.

It was *very* hard to find the energy to move.

José sat up straighter, frowning, thoughts running through mud. He shouldn't be *this* tired, surely? He wasn't hungry, he didn't feel fatigued from walking, he just felt tired. A heavy, aching, exhaustion that sang enticingly to him, begging for him to keep sitting. To lay down, even, maybe sleep- he might be waiting for a while to be found after all.

His partners wouldn't begrudge him resting a bit, would they? No, no, they would understand that this place was just so tiring, and he needed a bit of rest to find them, of course, of course…

He was so tired…

José forced himself up. It felt like the ground was clinging to his feathers, his hands and feet and suit-

He started walking along the beach. Each step dragged, like now that

he had noticed the lethargy he couldn't *stop* noticing it. The ground dragged, the water no longer soothing, but it was at least more than the vague darkness from before.

The chittering was gone, but he felt like he was being watched. Like whatever had been making noise was silent, now, but still present. Aware of him in a way that it hadn't been, before.

Waiting for him to succumb to sleep? Curious? Maybe it was just his mind and there was truly nothing at all here, he was just so desperate for some kind of interaction he was willing to conjure up a watching enemy just for something else alive to be nearby.

He kept walking, and humming when he could, keeping the waves on his left so he could listen to the water instead of the silence.

He didn't understand where he was; why he wasn't wherever Panchito had landed, or where Donald had been going- the portal spell had clearly broken when they'd entered, probably only meant for one person, but to go this far astray… José hoped Donald at least had gotten where he was going. That them following him through hadn't broken whatever mechanic was directing him.

What if they'd done something horrible, and now they all were lost somewhere in this awful nothing?

At least their egg was safe back home, with Gizmoduck. The poor man had looked well and truly out of his depth when Panchito had handed him the satchel, clutching it like he was afraid the fabric would slip from his hands, and he'd dropped, hard, to sit on the ground before José had lost sight of him in the shuddering portal opening.

How long would he wait, before he called someone else? He couldn't

stay that long, José assumed, there were heroic deeds to be done and Gizmoduck surely had a life and other duties outside of the armor. A few hours, he had to guess. A few hours at best, and then he would be trying to find someone else, and who would he choose? He didn't know Donald's real name, to say nothing of José and Panchito.

Perhaps one of them should have stayed behind. Yes, the three Caballeros always stuck together, but an egg was another level of responsibility. They should have had a plan in place at least; Donald had left assuming they would both be watching their child. How could they both betray that trust?

Though they may have done so if they'd had any idea where Donald was *going*- of all his secrets, this one he had never mentioned. And it seemed like an awfully big secret to be hiding! An entire other dimension! One he'd clearly been to before, had other friends who knew about it-

José knew he was being a touch unfair. Donald *had* been making efforts to reveal things, despite how clearly uncomfortable he was with it. Anxious, afraid, like the mere knowledge was a death sentence. He was often like that, about his secrets. And had it not been José that had told him not to worry about it? He could hardly blame Donald for not revealing all of this information when he himself had told him it was fine to hold it back.

He did resent it, though, he could admit it. That Donald thought the best way of handling the situation left them in the dark. He could look at the situation logically and say that it made Donald more comfortable, that his anxiety at revealing information was best handled by removing the pressure, they trusted him to tell them things when they became necessary (and he *had,* so far, done so!), and gave him the space to process and reveal his secrets at his own pace!

But in the comfort of his mind, José would admit he wished that Donald didn't have so many worries about trusting them. Him and

Panchito. Didn't constantly hold his concerns and troubles deep in his chest until he was ready to explode from the tension. Hadn't it helped, talking things through last time? He'd certainly slept soundly afterwards.

Perhaps they needed more evenings like that, quiet and comforting, away from the stress of the rest of the family…

That was unkind; the children were a welcome source of joy *and* stress.

His feet had stopped moving. He forced himself to start walking again.

It was McDuck and Della, from where José was standing, that were the largest issue. Panchito may be excited by the progress of receiving an actual apology, and Donald grudgingly willing to try again, but José wasn't convinced it was anything but a temporary change.

He could still remember Donald coming back from that adventure in the desert; fingertips blue and frosting over again, and again, and again, ice on any feathers not right next to the heat, shaking no matter how hot they got the room. The spell was never meant to be applied to anything but a sheep's wool; instead it had caught on Donald's skin and feathers, and his own innate ocean connection feeding the spell, caught it in a feedback loop that José couldn't break.

The ocean was far too *much* for him to overpower. He'd had to cut Donald off from magic entirely. It could kill a person.

It *had.* The Blot's weapons were only one way of separating magic from a person, there were plenty of spells that would do it. José only knew one. He'd been told to only use it on someone he wanted to die, and die painfully.

Donald had begged him to use it. Claimed it wouldn't kill him, please José, Joe, I can't *take it anymore-*

He'd lived. Explained that he had no innate magic to reach for, just an external source that he could find again. He'd been *grateful* for it.

José had had nightmares for months afterwards, of casting the spell and being greeted by silence. The desperate pleading fading to nothing at all, a mercy shot. He hadn't known about the Blot yet, had put that together later, he'd just assumed someone had done exactly what he'd done to Donald before and Donald, in his stubbornness, hadn't let it kill him. He supposed in a way he had been right.

The darkness swelled around him; he kept walking. The beach was endless, and seemed to go on without turning or changing. Normal, for a very large sea, but José found himself wishing it would swerve back and forth, give some discernible change to show he was still moving.

His thoughts continued to muddle through, thinking about Donald's secrets made him think about the Phantom Blot and how very, very worried he was that Donald was so involved. Made him realize that their egg was also in danger, that they were all *here* and not *there* with them- what if Gizmoduck was attacked? He was involved too, and there was no telling how long he'd been away!

Unless Donald had already returned home. He'd only expected to be gone for a short time, what if he'd been right, and it was just José and Panchito that had gotten lost elsewhere?

Or just José. He had landed alone, after all. The other two could have returned to Duckburg without him, but if that had happened they

would both be searching for him by now, they would find him soon.

The two of them together were an impressive team. Powerful, driven. He loved to watch them work together; coming home to find the pair already home had been delightful, when it happened.

José's job kept him running around, frequently. He didn't resent it, he *liked* traveling, but he did wish he could be home more, now that they were all together. Panchito was home every night, and with Donald traveling for his own job was alone at times, too. It would be nicer if they could all be together, working or traveling, instead of only two of them being in the same place at a time, like it had been lately.

Maybe he should consider a different job. He could find something that kept him in one place!

He would miss seeing new places, but Donald's family traveled often, and McDuck had asked them to join them next time. José could go along with them on those!

It would stress Donald out, though. He found his family adventures very stressful. But perhaps another adult he trusted would lessen that stress; another set of eyes on the children. Or perhaps he would even suggest his own ideas, seafaring trips that he'd always been more comfortable with, confident in his ability to keep everyone safe and sound while on the deck of a ship. If Donald was there, the voyage would go smoothly.

He ought to think of something else; the dark thoughts about Donald, and Panchito, and their egg back home, were making his feet drag worse and his head start to droop. Something lighter would make his feet lighter!

José moved his hands carefully to find his umbrella. Dragged it to his mouth.

And blew into the horn it became with a triumphant *blat!* that blasted across the land and sea like a gust of fresh air, and for a moment he could *breathe.*

He blew again, and again, barely bothering with notes in exchange for the sheer noise, but eventually the sound became a song, a mindless wandering thing that made his heartbeat pick up and his tail begin to wave. The muffled air seemed to loosen a bit, trumpet echoing across the water and coming back like a duet.

Up ahead of him, the blurry horizon sharpened, slightly. The waterline became a bit clearer, the sky almost discernible from the ground.

And half-hidden in the gloom, a tall hooded figure stood. Their open hood turned to face him.

Interlude: Fenton: PANIC

Fenton froze as the two strangers dove into the closing portal. No hesitation, just ‘here’s our egg, please keep it safe!’ and off they went!

He couldn’t look down. In his hands was an egg sachel. It wasn’t a particularly large bag, he honestly hadn’t noticed it before this moment, but now it felt huge. Like it was made of pure osmium, only the weight was the responsibility in his hands.

It was also a surprisingly heavy bag. He didn’t think he’d ever actually… held an egg? Ones for *cooking,* sure, but not a child.

Especially not *Paperinik’s* child. It had to be, right? He’d called in his romantic partners? Or, maybe, it was just el Gallo Loco’s… or his and Green Bat’s, but PK had to know whose it was at *least*.

He couldn’t look down. If he did, he would *know,* and he was trying so hard not to know-

Carefully, so carefully, he pulled the bag closed completely, so not even a hint of eggshell was visible. Then, once he was certain he could move without accidentally revealing anything, he dove for his gauntlets.

Or more accurately, the communicator controls; he’d found that having them purely work in his helmet using his mind meant he kept calling people just because he thought about them. Best to have a layer of separation.

Please let him be awake, *please*-

“Darkwing!” He gasped as soon as the line connected. “Thank goodness! Do you know Paperinik’s identity?! Please say yes!”

“What? Giz- it’s nearly three in the morning, why are you even awake?” Darkwing demanded, sounding perfectly awake and aware, because this was his normal shift. Fenton had forgotten.

“I was helping- not important, can explain later! PK’s identity, know it? You?”

“Wha- why? Is he injured? Do you need his medical proxy-”

“No, no no, but I- it’s- can you just answer the question?!”

A long silence. Fenton started to pace, biting his beak and hoping- if he didn’t know, Fenton would be out of good options, and he didn’t know what he would do-

“Yes. We know each other’s identities. Can you please tell me *why* you need to know this so I can stop coming up with worst-case scenarios?!”

Phew. Okay, good, step one was good.

“I need you to get to his Tower. Or, close to it? I need help, *please,* I don’t want to explain over the line, but he, ah, had to run off fast and left something that will *almost certainly reveal his identity to me if I look at it but I can’t leave it alone-”*

“Alright, alright, Gizmo, calm down!” Darkwing cut him off loudly, sounding- worried? But Darkwing didn’t like Fenton. Or, he didn’t like *Gizmoduck,* he liked Fenton well enough. “I’ll get there; you can let me in, right? If PK isn’t there?”

Fenton had no idea.

“I’ll meet you on the roof if I can’t,” he said, looking around. He could feasibly try to wire back into the system to access the security settings? He’d never actually seen Paperinik let someone in, he had no idea where that was; he hadn’t been able to use Uno’s system, Fenton assumed, so there had to be a separate interface he *could* access.

… like the keyboard and mouse that were on one of the smaller desks besides the main terminal. Yeah. That was probably it.

Of course Fenton probably didn’t have security access to it, but-

“Gizmo.” Darkwing said. It sounded like he’d said it a few times already. “Do you need me immediately? I need to know now, before I get going. I have… other places I usually go after patrol.”

Because his shifts were overnight. He probably had a job to go to, or a partner to check in with, or-

“I’ll- I'll be fine. For a bit, that's- that's fine. Finish what you need to do. And hey, he did say he wouldn’t be gone super long, this might be a false alarm!” Fenton exclaimed. Darkwing let out a thoughtful hum.

“Maybe, yeah. I’ll be there soon. And, uh, Giz? If that thing he left behind is what I think it is? *Keep it warm.”*

Fenton went pale, and he pulled the satchel closer. How warm was too warm? El Gallo had just had it on his hip, was that close enough? Fenton wasn’t wearing the full armor; he brought the egg closer to his chest. That would be fine, right?

Didn’t eggs need to be brooded on? How long could it go without that? There was no brooding chair here, and nothing to make a nest with. Maybe under a heat lamp? Or was that just the unhealthy ones? He could maybe rig something up…

“I can do that,” he said absently. “I can- do you know what temperature would be best? Hypothetically, of course, but a range would be great-”

“Just- body heat is fine, do *not* go creating some crazed gadget or gizmo to do anything! Keep it next to you and try not to panic, alright? Call me if you’re about to do something stupid, I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

The line went dead.

Okay, Fenton told himself. Okay, he could do this. He just needed to keep the egg next to him.

He looked around. He’d been here several times now, but he hadn’t really looked at anything besides the main room with the computer screens. Off to one side was a clear medical area, with a single cot and a metal box with a large red cross on it. Almost cliche, but obvious enough.

The other rooms, darkened but not locked, he knew held storage; it was where PK had pulled the Blot's things from, after all. But he didn't really want to snoop, so he turned away before the temptation of a distraction overtook his good sense.

A spare PK uniform on a mannequin- actually, it looked old, maybe it was an outdated one? - and off to one wall he hadn't looked at before was a couch and a few chairs.

He beelined over, dropping all armor except the helmet and settled down carefully, the egg sat in his lap.

Of course, once he was seated, and his heart rate started coming down, Fenton felt the exhaustion of the day hit him. He'd been running around all afternoon finalizing the tech for this trip, fine-tuning and hoping everything would work; he hadn't been able to ask Dr. Gearloose or Gandra, and they were usually his sounding boards for things, so to be on his own for this project had been daunting.

And then he'd visited Gandra anyway, not to talk about this but just to check in. She was doing fine, all things considered, but hated being under supervision. She was being allowed to work on getting into FOWL's systems, under the watchful eye of several SHUSH agents, and she complained bitterly about it.

Not the necessity of it, she understood that part, but the fact that the agents in question were ones with appropriate clearance to know who she was, not ones with similar levels of technical skill.

"They have other techies, I know they do!" She'd grumbled when he'd come by last. "I just want to talk to *someone* who knows a keyboard from a circuit board!"

He got it, he really did, but in his head, Fenton would admit he didn't think she was being very fair about things. This wasn't a job transfer, she had just left a terrorist organization. She was probably lucky to be allowed near any technology at all, if he was being honest.

Besides, it had only been a few weeks. Barely any time to establish any trust. She'd be better off once she could prove she meant her change. Or managed to get into the FOWL systems.

She had tried to tell him something else, before he'd left today, but second guessed herself and shook her head, only saying that she'd explain later. And asked him to consider taking a break.

"Oh, I don't have much to do lately! Besides the whole Gizmoduck thing, we're actually not working any large projects; Mr. McDuck is having a big party for some investors, so he asked we clear the labs of anything… volatile for a bit. Just in case!" Fenton had reassured her. She'd chuckled, but still looked troubled.

"Still, you could use a bit of time to yourself. Take a night off and have some pizza or something, try to put Doom into the armor tech or something," she'd suggested, and he'd laughed again. "Hey, it could be helpful someday during another alien invasion! Besides, you don't have to go to that party, right? Your boss won't know if you're sitting at home instead of patrolling."

"Well… I'll think about it. Some villains might try to take advantage of so many famous people being in one place…"

"They'd be more focused on the party Emma Glamour is hosting anyway," she'd dismissed. "Oh, hey, maybe if you offer to do security you can go to *that* party instead!"

“I don’t think Miss Glamour would want something as ‘not it’ as the armor running around her party,” he’d snorted. “Didn’t she post something about it being a gaudy abomination and an insult to the color white?”

Gandra had laughed at that, and seemed in higher spirits when he’d left.

To come here, and then they’d worked through Uno’s systems to start a reboot, and now…

Now Fenton was here, with the egg, watching the loading bar creep across the screen.

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That was going to take a while.

He leaned his head back against the back of the couch, arms wrapped carefully around the egg. He could afford to rest a bit, he reasoned. It was well past his usual bedtime, and Darkwing wouldn’t be here for a while. He could just close his eyes; he just needed to not see the egg.

Plausible deniability and all.

“Gizmo. Giz!”

Fenton shot up with a shriek, arms shooting up to clutch at the bag in his lap so it didn’t go flying.

“Wha- Darkwing!”

He bolted to the computer, hoping- and yes, there was an option to open the doors on screen. He didn’t know if PK had changed some security settings or if it just allowed him access because he was already inside, and wanted to ask Paperinik later. Just in case, because the Tower had become their default meeting place for the three of them, and knowing the security features would be helpful-

Darkwing slid inside, rubbing his face. He looked exhausted; bags visible under his eyes even around the mask, bandages clearly around his arms and half his uniform already gone. His eyes were concerned, darting between the satchel and Fenton.

“You good there, gearhead?”

“Ah, yeah, just fell asleep- patrol go alright?” He stuttered out, clutching the bag closer.

Paperinik wasn’t back, unfortunately, and neither were his two companions. He’d been hoping that maybe- but he hadn’t said exactly how long he would be gone, and he’d probably assumed his companions would keep the egg and stay there, not that Fenton would have the egg, so maybe he’d meant a few days-

“Fine, bit busy but nothing big. Got a potential lead about the Blot’s

helicopter escape, but it fizzled out," Darkwing said slowly, looking around. He focused on the computer screen. "What's happening here?"

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"We, ah- we were able to get into the system! Well, PK did, and I think he was able to reactivate Uno- that loading bar started up when he went into the inner parts of the system, so I think it worked anyway. We'll have to wait and see when the reboot finishes, but I'm pretty confident!"

But with progress that slow, it would take a while. He could do the math on how long, but that might not be accurate; if the percentage went system by system, it could slow down for the more complicated sections. Best to just keep an eye on it.

Pity he couldn't trust Lil Bulb to stay here without doing something naughty; it would be good to have someone consistently here to track the progress. Maybe PK knew someone that could do it?

"That's fantastic! PK must have been over the moon, huh?" Darkwing enthused, brightening considerably. "You didn't say where he went?"

"Right! Right, he, um- so a magic portal opened up, he said he had to deal with that, and he ran through," Fenton explained. "And that's all I know; his friends handed me this and ran after him!"

He gestured to the bag in his hands, which Darkwing reached out to take. Fenton hesitated, just for a moment, before handing it over. He didn't want to be responsible for an egg! But he *was* responsible for it, and shouldn't he keep it?

But he was exhausted, even with his nap, he had work to get to and he was certain if he looked *at* the egg he might know whose it was. And if he figured that out he would know who Paperink was under the mask and he was *trying very hard not to know that thank you very much!*

Darkwing settled the bag onto his hip, wrapping his cape over it so it was partially covered and even closer to his body. He seemed comfortable with the satchel; Fenton was not going to think about it. Maybe the guy had kids of his own! Or niblings, Lord knew Fenton knew a lot of uncles that were heavily involved with their niblings. Could even be a family friend thing.

Or Darkwing just knew how to put on an egg satchel and Fenton was overthinking everything because he was freaking out.

“Friends…? Wait, no, think I know who you mean,” Darkwing said slowly, clearly biting back a longer statement. “And they said they’d be back soon?”

“Well, PK did; I think he knew it wouldn’t be long usually, but with the other two running after him I don’t know, and I can’t leave the egg alone obviously, but-”

“But you can’t stay,” Darkwing cut him off with a strict expression. “That’s it, you just can’t stay any longer, because your schedule is the day shift and it's nearly dawn. Nothing else, alright?”

Shoot!

Right. If Darkwing knew who PK was, and Fenton kept implying he *might* know something depending on what the egg looked like, that could reveal *his* identity to Darkwing. Why was Fenton so *bad* at secret identities?!

“Yes,of course! I’m just tired; SHUSH is having me help with some of the FOWL hunt, and I’m still working my usual job and patrols…” he explained, hoping to distract from his near slip up. Darkwing huffed.

“You should try to get some sleep,” he admonished, but his tone was… kinder, than usual. More exasperated than truly irritated. “And either get some help in the armor or at your job; your boss knows you’re doing hero work, he could cut you some slack.”

“Well, they’re not pushing me *too* hard, but I signed up for this! On top of my actual job, and it wouldn’t be appropriate of me to stop doing what I was hired for to focus on hero work, but on the other hand, if I stop doing hero work then I might miss something that I *could* have prevented. And of course FOWL is a threat that needs to be handled…”

“Gizmoduck. You really need to stop taking after Paperinik,” Darkwing cut him off again, shaking his head. “You both have this whole ‘the world will end without me personally’ thing going, and you need to let it go. Get some sleep, you’ll be useless to everyone if you collapse from exhaustion.”

“You’re one to talk,” Fenton grumbled before he could catch it. “It’s not like you’re any better, your eyebags practically match your costume!”

Darkwing blinked at him, scowling reflexively, before he let out a tired chuckle.

“Alright, point taken, we’re all idiots that need some sleep,” he grumbled, waving a hand. “Fine. Now go home and get some rest, I’m just going to sleep here anyway.”

“Just sleep? No working?” Fenton asked. Mostly out of curiosity, because he wasn’t certain he’d ever seen Darkwing take a break in the short time they’d known each other. When he’d been trying to help that girl, Gosalyn… Fenton had been getting requests and information at all hours.

Darkwing made a face at him.

“Maybe a bit of file sorting, but no, genuinely sleeping. This is past my bedtime,” he joked. Which raised some interesting questions about his work schedule, but Fenton didn’t ask. He could be independently wealthy? He had had some strong opinions about Fenton being sponsored by Mr. McDuck, so clearly he wasn’t getting paid for his own efforts…

“I can drop by later with some food,” he offered; Darkwing nodded, but it was absent-minded. He was already slowly shuffling to the couch. “And please let me know if PK gets back!”

“Go *home,* Giz, I’ll keep you posted if anything interesting happens.”

He’d already sunk onto the couch, tugging the cape around himself and the egg satchel like a blanket. Fenton abruptly wanted to find him an actual blanket, and pillow, maybe?

He was turning into his M’ma. But Darkwing couldn’t be comfortable like that! He was still partially in uniform, even, and Fenton was guessing that wouldn’t be nice to sleep in, tired or not, but there wasn’t much he could do about it.

He *could* slip over to the medical wing though, where he did find a

small pillow and a few blankets tucked away. They were mostly in shades of blue, but one especially large one was a vivid green that reminded Fenton of the orb in the center of the room.

He took that one, trotting back over to cover the dozing hero and tossing it over him and the egg, before carefully tucking the pillow under his cheek.

“Thnks.”

Fenton nodded, mostly to himself, and then activated the armor and left the Tower. If he felt like he was running away from an issue, well. So be it. He could admit to himself he wasn’t the best equipped to deal with a new egg, nor the fact that his mind was desperately trying to connect twe very simple dots on the egg, the two companions, and how that could connect to another person he knew.

Turned out being on the receiving end of someone’s secret identity was no fun either.

He didn’t remember much after getting home. No dreams, just dead to the world for a few hours before the alarm went off.

Then off to check in with Dr. Gearloose (who promptly told him there was no work to be done in the lab until the investor party was over ‘just in case’, and to do hero nonsense or work on his own time), then back to the Tower with coffee and some sandwiches. He had no idea what Darkwing liked, besides Chinese takeout and pizza, but surely a hero would prefer something a bit healthier on occasion?

Darkwing let him in without a word, and was clearly wrapping up a

phone call when Fenton got inside.

"... no, I'll be fine, hopefully it won't be too much longer. Yeah, if it is, I'll give you a call. Gizmo's here though, gotta- yeah, love you too! Bye."

He put the phone away, and snagged the larger coffee cup from Fenton's hands with a grateful sigh.

"How is it hard to watch an *egg?!"* He grumbled after taking several large gulps. "They don't even *do* anything!"

"Stress? Cause they're so easy to mess up?" Fenton suggested. He didn't glance at the egg, which was out of the satchel but wrapped in the cape now, sitting in Darkwing's lap. "Might be different if it also wasn't someone else's."

"Yeah, yeah, probably. Fuck, this is good, where did you go?" Darkwing demanded, taking another gulp. "Swear there's no good coffee in St. Canard."

"Uh, the one near the industrial sector; it's the only one that has good hot chocolate, and crying kids usually calm down with some hot chocolate, so I can ask where their parents are," Fenton explained absently. Darkwing nodded thoughtfully.

"I usually let them try on my hat," he replied with a small smile. "Seems to do the trick. Imagine you can't really let them put the helmet on, though."

"Not without a bunch of programming, and they'd have access to my

systems, and-" Fenton started, before his mind caught up to the fact that it was a joke. "Yeah, not the best idea."

Darkwing laughed, setting the coffee aside to start eating, looking slightly manic about it.

"Wonder what PK does with lost kids," he mused a few moments later. "He's good with kids, he has to have a good trick."

"Probably carries them around on his shoulders or something, he's stupid strong," Fenton said absently.

"Yeah, he is! We went- hmm. Nevermind."

Fenton was not going to think about that! He was already on the verge of knowing something he didn't want to know, if he let himself consider what Darkwing had clearly been close to saying he might figure out more.

He just didn't want to know yet!

… he was almost guaranteed to figure things out, though. He couldn't just turn his mind off. But if he didn't think about it, maybe he could at least delay the realization until they trusted him enough to just say it instead.

Darkwing finished eating and seemed to settle in to work, instead of preparing to leave, which left Fenton in an awkward position of not knowing what to do. Leave? Offer to take over so he could go home?

"Well, my plan is to take over here until PK gets back," Darkwing said, mostly to himself. "Figure if he's going to be out of town I can use his system for a bit anyway, maybe a change of scenery will make something stand out. If you're trying to, well. Avoid the Tower for a bit, feel free."

Well *now* Fenton felt like he was abandoning his job. Something he'd been asked to do. Him, specifically. And instead he'd just handed the task over to Darkwing! He could have just slept on the couch himself!

Although, there was the issue of access... he didn't know if he could get back *into* the Tower without someone inside to open the door. So he would have had to cal *someone* eventually to eat, he supposed.

"Giz?"

"Ah- feeling a bit like i called you for no reason? I mean- I appreciate the help, really really do, but now that I've gotten some sleep it feels like I was just being lazy-"

"Or," Darkwing said with an eyeroll, "you were freaked out and called in backup; that's what you *should* do if the problem's looking daunting. It's fine. And you got food, so I'm willing to forgive you. Relax."

"Since when?" Fenton muttered, too low for Darkwing to hear, before he shook off the thought. He knew Darkwing wasn't especially fond of him i the armor, so if he was willing to help *anyway,* it was- that was a good thing. It meant they were allies, at least, right?

“If you’re staying, then sit down and help me go through this,” Darkwing grumbled without looking up from the table covered in notes and surveillance photos. “I swear I have something here but I’m going blind from looking too long. Could use a second pair of eyes.”

Fenton paused, then smiled and slid forward, dropping a few pieces of armor so he could sit more comfortably.

“Okay! What do you have so far?”

Aphasia

Goofy plopped down in the cockpit, humming. Donald glanced at him, but kept his focus on steering. Sora had taken on more of the running of the gummi ship lately, but he was still a teenager that needed sleep, so Donald and Goofy handled the overnight flights where they only had to watch for occasional Heartless on the long way to and from planets without warp access yet.

Goofy remained quiet; he was supposed to take over for Donald soon. Donald should give him the controls, but he wasn't ready to sleep just yet.

Donald wanted to ask about Max; he had to be looking for colleges now, right? Unless he was taking a gap year, maybe. But the world order spell locked his throat. Even when it was just the two of them, he couldn't voice anything that wasn't a Kingdom Hearts question; the ship was too small, and Sora was too close.

So he just passed along a cup of caf and continued steering. It was the closest equivalent of coffee available; it was weak, and tasted more like dirt than anything else, but it was the only thing around if you didn't want to drink an Elixer to keep going.

The realm was nice enough from the magical healing standpoint, but it really lacked in food and drink options. Besides that restaurant that Scrooge's weird doppelganger was running, they never seemed to find anywhere with normal food; half the places they went people seemed to just live off of potions. The others were almost entirely fresh produce, which was nice until all you wanted was a sandwich but the area you were in didn't have *bread.*

Baffling. He hoped the restaurant did well enough to catch on; he hated living off a liquid potion diet, but they didn't always have time

to find real food. Just potions and cheap rations to stock the ship up with.

At least they had ice cream; after they'd tried sea-salt ice cream, Sora had been obsessed, and insisted they keep some on the ship at all times. Donald, who was a sucker, had agreed. He couldn't help it; Sora asked for so little, really. If it wasn't for his friends, he didn't seem to want anything.

So. Ice cream. Fresh fruit from wherever they'd landed last, and enough rice and caf to tide them over until the next real meal somewhere; Donald was close to picking up hunting, but the number of places they'd been with talking but otherwise normal looking animals made him wary of it. At least back home the animals that could talk also walked upright!

He didn't think Sora would forgive him if they ate what turned out to be an intelligent animal; he was damn fond of animals as it was.

It was fine. The whole place was a war-zone, he wasn't expecting gourmet; they were probably lucky they could consistently forage.

"Gawrsh, the stars sure are pretty, aren't they?" Goofy offered quietly. Donald smiled, letting out a sigh. He rubbed at his chest, tugging at his lapels.

"Yeah, it's a nice view," he agreed. They didn't usually get a quiet moment. Even now, they were racing around trying to get ahead of Xehanort while Mickey and Riku were searching for Master Aqua. Who they needed to help get Ventus out of Sora's heart. Meanwhile Ienzo and Evan were building clone bodies like nobody's business (no pun intended) to have places *for* all of these disparate Hearts. Donald imagined they'd be making one for Namine at some point, but he couldn't remember if anyone had mentioned it. Surely someone had?

Not to mention the whole Repliku thing… there were too many copies and clones here. And he'd *just* found out FOWL was cloning their own people- no, no use thinking about that. FOWL would wait until he got home, he couldn't do anything about that issue and he knew from personal experience that thinking about issues back in Duckburg would only make him more anxious the longer he was trapped on this side.

He allowed himself one brief, desperate moment of thinking about Panchito and José. Their egg, their support, how much he loved and missed them. Then he turned his thoughts back to the ship.

He didn't think about the kids. He *couldn't.*

Another planet, two, and if he was able to rest long enough to enjoy being here, Donald would love to study this place. Namely, what the hell was going on with all the different 'worlds.' It was pretty clear that they couldn't be natural; Atlantica had been *entirely* underwater on their first visit! Donald swore it had been! But when they'd returned it had *grown* and everyone there acted like that land and the humans had always been there!

It would be fascinating if it didn't make him *constantly* feel like he was losing his mind.

His best theory was that as they reconnected worlds and cleaned up Heartless, the worlds were regaining pieces of themselves that had been lost in darkness; the residents didn't know that they'd been missing for the same reason the people lost in darkness never seemed to remember it when they recovered. Had he had time to ask Triton about it, he would have; surely the King would know, right? He'd been aware of other worlds and all…

Not that Donald really thought they were different *worlds,* just different parts of one. Too many fairy tales talked about separating the light to protect it from the darkness, and that lined up awful nice with the disconnected worlds and world hearts and all the nonsense they'd been told about why they couldn't easily reach other worlds. It wasn't separate worlds that you could fly to, it was a magical quarantine you could brute force your way through.

Of course, it made each place more vulnerable to complete collapse into darkness when their populations were so small, their history fragmented and their people missing parts of their own society that they didn't even realize were gone. But it could, theoretically, slow the spread of Darkness.

Maybe. Donald personally thought they'd be better off putting everything back together, Darkness clearly bred in the in-between spaces, but it wasn't like anyone asked *him.* Yen Sid was pretty clear he *particularly* didn't trust a Mage that had to rely on a pre-built staff.

Jerk. Like he had *any* idea what he was talking about.

"Donald! We're getting a call from Merlin!" Sora shouted from the cockpit, drawing Donald out of his thoughts. He groaned, rubbed his eyes, and walked to the front of the ship.

Sora had his phone out so they could all see it, hitting answer when Donald got there, and revealing not Merlin, but the Fairy Godmother, holding the phone *just* a bit too close to really see anything but her nose.

"Oh, my dears, can you hear me? My, this is a strange contraption-" She asked, and then the view was moving here and there, like she was

looking at the thing from all angles. Donald stifled a laugh; Goofy choked on his.

“Hi! Yes, we can hear you!” Sora replied cheerfully; he’d been in a good mood lately. Something about either rescuing Roxas or having consistent access to his friends had lessened the tension he’d carried since he was thirteen. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, well! Merlin asked me to contact you, he’s gone ahead with the others to Yen Sid’s Tower,” she replied distractedly, still wiggling the phone here and there, “They’ve completed their training, so they’re heading to meet you. There was something else, I believe- hmm, what was it now…”

“We’ll head that way!” Sora announced, twisting to look down at the controls to alter their course. “Merlin can tell us what the rest of the message was.”

There was a quiet chittering sound, like a mouse or squirrel, and the Fairy Godmother glanced away with a ‘hmm?’

“Oh, yes, that was it! They have a guest with them!” She exclaimed with a smile. “You’ll want to meet them at the Tower as quickly as you can!”

A guest?

Donald glanced at Goofy, who shrugged. If they were calling this person a guest, it was… probably fine, maybe someone from Sora’s island? Clearly they weren’t a threat, and that meant a possible ally.

Donald considered if maybe they'd somehow come across one of their missing Keyblade Masters and stifled a laugh. *That* would be nice, save them some time in their hunt.

It was probably some Xehanort clone, he thought darkly, smile dimming. *That* would be more in line with their luck.

Sora couldn't keep himself from bouncing on his heels as they approached the Tower entrance, talking a mile a minute about seeing Kairi again; how pleased he was that she was also training, how they would get to fight together- Donald could hear the worry underneath. How Kairi would be on the front lines with them. How she would be fighting properly, not just defending herself, and their enemies were getting more numerous by the day.

Donald had to bite his tongue. He didn't *care* about this seven lights, thirteen darknesses bullshit, he just wanted *no kids on the battlefield.*

But he had to admit, as he'd had to during the Shadow War, that these kids were the exact kind of people to never let themselves sit by the sidelines. If he tried to block them, if he tried to put them somewhere safe and handle it himself, they would just sneak in and do it anyway. Fight openly with the adults, or sneak in and have no support at all. He knew it would happen; he'd seen it again, and again, and again.

Didn't mean he had to like it. Didn't mean he wasn't constantly at war with himself on that topic, wishing he could just protect everyone he loved and keep them all safe from danger. Put them in a box and defend it to his death.

But they wouldn't stay in that box; he usually had to leap right after them to keep them safe, and it felt never-ending, they didn't even

notice his efforts most of the time-

They entered the Tower and started to climb. The stairs were long today, which probably would give them some insight into Yen Sid's state of mind if Donald cared at all. All it meant to him right now was a delay in getting this done, a delay in getting their question finished, and a delay in going *home.*

He liked Sora and the others here, considered Sora one of his kids, but-

He had his life on the other side. His real life, the one he had to return to; he couldn't *stay* here even if he wanted to. The spell that drew them here was a complex, messy thing, but the core of it was that dealing with Darkness and Heartless needed people that hadn't been effectively soaking in that darkness for their entire existence. So it grabbed likely people from a distant universe that were as far removed as they could be. The longer they stayed here, the less that natural resistance would help, and the more they risked bringing the Darkness back with them.

Something that filled Donald with a horror he struggled to put into words; it was bad enough *here,* with their small isolated worlds. In *Duckburg?* They'd never root out the infestation. It would rot in the sewers and dark alleys for the rest of existence.

Maybe there was a good reason for the quarantine.

Stairs and stairs, and even more stairs. They could try flying up, but Donald strongly suspected even if they tried it wouldn't work. The stairs expanded magically, not physically; he would bet their length was based on time spent walking, not number of stairs. Maybe if they walked very, very slowly, the stairs would shorten accordingly.

At least the Tower wasn't infested with Nobodies this time.

At the top of the Tower, there were voices audible through the door. Confusion, surprise, excitement, concern. Sora didn't pause to listen, bursting through the doors instead with a cheerful shout of "Kairi!"

And a moment later, "Lea!"

"It's Axel, kid," Axel replied, sounding tired. It was the third time he'd switched that Donald could recall, but he got it, it had to be hard having those two conflicting lives and names-

Then his thought screeched to a complete halt.

Panchito.

Panchito~!

Panchito?

Panchito?!

Donald froze in the doorway, staring; Panchito was *there,* talking to Merlin and wearing that black shirt still and *why was he here?!*

Why was he here, where was José why was it just Panchito here-

Goofy slid past him into the room, enthusiastically asking what was going on, he didn't see Panchito but Panchito was looking now, he'd seen Goofy and-

Their eyes met. Panchito looked excited. And relieved, eyes darting all over Donald's form before going back to his face.

Donald was frozen.

Panchito waved, slipping through the gaggle of people to get to him, smile falling to confusion as he neared.

Donald was frozen.

"Donal'!" He called, and the room went quiet. "Amor, there you are! I was lucky enough to find your friend's friends, and they brought me here!"

Donald. Was. Frozen.

"... the egg with Gizmoduck, he was very surprised but promised he would make sure it was safe…"

The World Order spell, intended to keep anyone from spilling Disney's secret to maintaining safety in another plague of Darkness, locked his beak. He couldn't speak, he couldn't *breathe,* his eyes darted wildly, desperately, *he couldn't breathe-*

“Donal’?”

His hands twitched for a breath, and then his hands, too, were frozen; Donald couldn’t even gesture and acknowledge his partner, who was now standing in front of him, frowning. Confusion melting into concern.

“Donal’, can you speak?” He asked, and Donald managed to shake his head before his neck locked; he could answer *that* question, but his thoughts had strayed briefly to being able to answer *other* questions, and the World Order spell was a harsh, all-encompassing thing.

He couldn’t breathe. His chest *burned.*

“Um, Donald? You okay?” Sora asked; Donald couldn’t even move to answer *him,* all he could think about was that he needed to talk to Panchito but every movement, every breath was getting trapped in a secrecy spell that was *way too powerful.*

Panchito reached out a hand to his shoulder; Donald shuddered, could feel concern pouring through the amulet (how had he not felt it getting warm earlier? What else had he missed?), and forced his gaze to Goofy.

Thankfully, Goofy realized what was happening, and nodded decisively.

“I think we need to call the King!” He declared. “He’ll know what to do!”

Behind them all Yen Sid, who had stood from his desk, narrowed his

eyes thoughtfully at Donald. He nodded in agreement.

"Yes, I believe His Majesty will have some… insight. In the meantime, please, everyone, gather in the other room; I will see to Donald."

Donald didn't hear everyone leaving. He could only watch Panchito, who was looking back at him with worry. Donald managed to force his beak into a smile; smiling didn't mean anything, he told himself, as someone pulled Panchito away. Smiling meant nothing.

Nothing at all.

The room was empty, besides Yen Sid, who looked down at Donald while the World Order spell loosened its grip. Yen Sid wasn't from Disney, but he was considered 'in the know,' so the spell didn't apply to *him.*

It still took a minute for Donald to gain control of his jaw again and spat out, "There are *two* of them, where is José?!"

"So you intentionally broke the bounds of the spell," Yen Sid mused calmly. "I would be interested in hearing how-"

"I didn't do this on *purpose,* they were both in the room because *I have no control on when the fucking portal opens!"* Donald snarled back, shaking out his hands; his left hand was still numb, but that damage was from the lightning spells, he still needed to get that healed- "If the people that designed it had given things more than a *minute* to consider, they might have realized this could happen!"

"The portal only allows one magical signature through, Mage," Yen

Sid replied evenly. Always calm, so calm it was clearly condescending.

"And as you love to remind me, *I don't have one,"* Donald retorted, shoving his hand under his shirt to yank out his amulet. "This is tied to two others, one of which Panchito was wearing. José has the third, and if Pancho is here, so is he; *where is he?!"*

"You keep asking me," Yen Sid answered with a slight twitch of annoyance in his mustache, "as if I would know. It is your responsibility to handle the portal summons and secrecy. I cannot see how the warning the King offers isn't sufficient to find an empty room."

"Sure! Let me just hop into an empty room!" Donald shouted, fed up. "And when I don't emerge for *hours* or even a few *days,* nobody will ask 'hey, is Donald locked in the pantry or something?'"

He didn't let himself think about how the answer was often yes.

"I have kids! Other responsibilities! I didn't *choose* this role, *Master* Yen Sid, so forgive me if rearranging my life to always be alone wasn't the first thing on my radar when I came here!"

"You have *kids?!"*

Donald bit back an exasperated sigh even as the spell reactivated; apparently it didn't realize they'd had eavesdroppers. Yen Sid looked flabbergasted at the interruption. Donald was just irritated the kids hadn't had the good sense to keep quiet; they could have learned more that way.

Apparently the spell only activated if Donald *knew* there were other people listening. Interesting.

Panchito was already back in the room, but this time he just pulled Donald into a hug from behind, resting his chin on Donald's head, and the pose was so stupidly familiar he felt like crying.

He might actually be crying, honestly.

"What do you mean you have *kids?!"* Sora shouted, jumping right up in Donald's face. Donald closed his eyes; he felt like he was choking on his breath. "You've never said anything about kids, when did that happen?!"

Eleven years. Twenty years. Three years because he'd only met Sora three years ago to Sora *but it had been so much longer for him-*

His throat was frozen. He leaned back into Panchito's chest.

Where was José?

"Sora, the situation is more complicated than you know," Yen Sid began, tone shifting smoothly to his wise mentor role; Sora clearly wasn't interested in hearing it.

"What's complicated?! Either he has kids or he doesn't! What, are you gonna tell me Goofy's got kids too?!"

Panchito muffled a cough into Donald's hat; Sora apparently heard

him.

“What, really? And *you* know?” He demanded. Panchito muffled another laugh.

“I’m afraid we haven’t met yet! I’m Panchito!” He offered, letting go of Donald with one hand to hold it out to shake. Donald cracked his eyes open; Sora looked mulish. He didn’t take the offered hand. “And I think there is a very good reason Donal’ has not told you about me or his family. He loves to talk about them!”

Donald huffed, frustrated and amused and *where was José?!*

“And you know them?” Sora grumbled, crossing his arms. Donald wanted to scream. It hadn’t been his idea! Not telling the kid he was in charge of about his life was *torture,* he *hated* it, he hated this place-

Panchito’s arms tightened; Donald realized that the one thing that the spell couldn’t stop him from doing was projecting emotions through the connection.

…actually, could he talk to Panchito *alone?* The portal had clearly mixed their magical signatures together, maybe the other spell would think they were the same person?

Something they could try, but first-

“I believe this conversation should wait for His Majesty,” Yen Sid interrupted before Sora or Panchito could speak; Donald managed to spare a glance at Axel and Kairi, who looked terribly out of place and confused, and Merlin, who was watching him with concern.

Well. No. That expression was more of a dawning realization. Donald should probably be concerned by that, but he still couldn't even *speak,* since everyone had decided to stay in the room and argue with Yen Sid and *Donald could only talk to members of the Disney royal court.*

Panchito was humming in his ear.

"We will fix this," he promised in Spanish, "and then we will find José, yes? That's why you're worried?"

Donald couldn't actually *answer,* but he did relax, and that seemed answer enough.

But still. Panchito had apparently landed in Merlin's *pocket dimension.* So where in the worlds had José landed?

Where was he?

Interlude: Aqua: New Faces

José was funny, Aqua thought. Polite and charming, and so very strange to meet here in the Realm of Darkness. He didn't seem to know how he'd arrived here, insisted he'd gone through some portal after a friend. Donald. And a Panchito, who wasn't here either. They'd become separated, and he didn't know how.

Aqua didn't want to tell him the truth. That his world had probably been engulfed in the darkness. That his friends were lost somewhere in the dark, most likely, or maybe washed up in Traverse Town or another crossroads. His egg, left with a friend as he chased down his friends, was… well, that she didn't know. The portal question threw her a bit. He wasn't trained in traveling this realm, so clearly it wasn't a portal *to* the Realm of Darkness. But José may not remember things clearly. She knew she didn't, not anymore.

Someone was supposed to be coming to get her, she knew that. She was supposed to be waiting for someone.

Sora? She thought she'd been told that name. She needed to remember it. Remember that someone was coming for her.

José could come with her. He didn't need to wait here in the dark, and if his friends were somewhere, they could find them.

He insisted they would look for him. That he needed to stay by the water, because Donald would find that first. She didn't know a Donald, so she couldn't say if that was true or not, but the waves were a comfort. A something in the grey nothing, something that was real instead of a dream or hallucination. With company, she could remember Ventus, and that she needed to remain strong to protect him. He needed time to heal, and she had to protect him from-

A flash of Terra's face, warped beyond recognition, hair turned silver and darkness seeping from his pores.

She shuddered. She had saved him from being trapped here, and she prayed that he could one day throw off the possession, but his face… He had scared her. Aqua never wanted to see another friend face that.

"You seem distracted," José chided gently. He was gentle, most of the time. Quiet, at others. He kept jerking upwards when they stopped talking for too long, like he was falling asleep, and tried to get her to continue chatting as soon as he came back to himself.

Stay awake. They couldn't afford to rest; the darkness would creep into the crevices of the mind, eat away at their resolve. She'd been taught how to fight it, to resist, but she'd been here for a very long time, she thought. Long enough for the young children from Destiny Islands to have taken up their keyblades and joined the endless war with the dark.

Someone was looking for her. She had to wait for them. For Sora, she thought, or maybe he was one of the children now fighting?

José was waiting for Donald. For Panchito. He seemed sad when he talked of them; he hoped they were safe, that they had landed somewhere kinder than here. He said they were too large and bright for this place.

"Just thinking," she replied quietly, twisting the stones in her hands. She was making a charm. It wasn't her usual style, which were usually tied in a star. Aqua didn't have enough shells to make one of those. But José had had some small rocks in his pockets, and she still carried twine. It was too dark to see if the stones matched, but she liked that she had something to do with her hands.

She felt like she'd had shells with her, at one point. Maybe back at the beginning. Maybe she'd made those into charms already, and lost them. Or given them away.

"Tell me more about your friends," she asked, hoping his voice would keep her from drifting. He gave her a funny look at the word friends (he had used partner, she thought, but it sounded so *formal!),* but nodded and began to speak.

They sounded like great people. Donald became this brave, determined figure in her head, a shield against all danger, and Panchito a bright and loyal companion, someone to stand by your side against all odds. They reminded her of- but she didn't want to think about them. About Terra, and Ventus. And Master Eraqus.

So she let herself imagine their adventures, with their other friend the goddess Xandra and another bird named Ari, and when José mentioned the *kids* she was fully awake.

"How many did you say he has?!" She demanded, sitting up straight from where she'd been leaning against her hands. "You've mentioned triplets *twice!"*

"Sim, sim, there are two sets of them! The girls, they are Daisy's nieces, you see, and he is very fond of them. They're grown up now, I think they're near your age, if I don't miss my guess," he explained, laughing. "The younger ones, they are his nephews, from his sister Della! Raised them from eggs, she was… lost, for a time. But she has returned!"

Lost, and returned? That sounded nice. Aqua let out a pleased sigh. It was a good story. She would admit to being fond of happy endings.

“And now he has his new niece, Webby, she is quite the energetic little one! Very adventurous!” He continued, waving a hand as he explained. “Have I told you how we first met her?”

He hadn’t. The fight with the plant monster was certainly a crazy way to meet your… partners family after some time!

Aqua was beginning to suspect partner didn’t mean what she thought it did; he looked far too fond of the two of them for it to apply the way she was thinking of it. And he had said *their* egg earlier…

Which meant his *romantic* partners were out there somewhere, and their egg was with a friend somewhere else entirely. It was impressive how he was holding up.

But she could see the slightest of shadows on his bright feathers; slowly, slowly, he was losing the fight. She didn’t dare look down on herself. Her cloak helped keep her safe, at least-

“José, do you want to share my cloak? You must be cold,” she offered, opening it up. She didn’t like the immediate chill of the darkness, but with two of them, they should be able to keep each other warm and light, right?

He hesitated, but either the chill of the realm or the desperation she could feel in her voice convinced him, and a moment later she had a warm bundle of feathers settling against her side, staring out at the waves.

“This is a lovely cloak,” José offered quietly, as she closed it best she could; it was unfortunately a well-fitted cloak as well, and she

couldn't clasp it with them both inside. "Thank you for sharing, my friend."

"I'm happy to do it!" She insisted; she felt more energetic now, like having a living person this close was helping more than the cloak did. "We can both be warm while we wait for them to find us."

José hummed in agreement.

"Tell me about your friends?" He asked after a moment, and this time, Aqua was able to answer.

The waves continued unabated. José was humming a song, warm next to her. He'd explained a strange investigation he was helping Donald with, finding a horrible person who stole magic from people, and had lapsed into a heavy silence for some time before taking up a mournful tune.

"Do you think you'll catch him?" She asked, when the humming and the waves weren't enough to keep the creeping dark away from her thoughts. Her hands were turning slowly, slowly gray.

"I am certain we will!" He declared. "But I worry about Donald. He is taking the situation very hard; he caught him the first time, you see? He blames himself for the Phantom Blot escaping, and… he was badly injured the first time. I worry he may be hurt worse before we are able to catch him."

He sighed, tired. His toes weren't as vibrant as they had been earlier today, though she couldn't see much else. He didn't have protective clothing; didn't almost everyone now? He was so undefended here…

“My Donald takes on so much,” he whispered. “And he is so hesitant to ask for help. To even say what is happening, because then we will insist on helping anyway and he knows this. Fears what we might do to help him.”

Like leaping after him through a portal, Aqua thought, but didn’t say.

“You care about him greatly,” she said instead. “And he clearly cares about you two, or he wouldn’t try so hard to protect you.”

“Ah, but if he is spending so much time protecting us,” José replied, “then he cannot easily protect himself.”

To that, she had no response. She hadn’t thought about that much, before. The idea of being so protective you left yourself vulnerable instead.

“Perhaps a lighter topic instead?” He offered, and proceeded to tell her about his own family, his nephews Zico and Zeca and his sister, their mother. She told him about training as a Keyblade Master, though she skipped the title itself (probably not wise to advertise that while she was unarmed), focusing on Ventus and Terra, the trouble they got into. The people she’d met on her travels, and José offered his own stories in return. He said he was a flight attendant, a title she’d never heard before.

“So you have large flying machines, and people can just pay to be transported elsewhere? Just like that?” She asked, curious. She’d used Gummi ships, and her own Keyblade, and portals, but never a ship that *size.* How could you even build one?

“There are some rules! Mostly for safety, of course. But yes, we can travel all over the world this way!”

His world sounded enormous. José mentioned flights that could take *hours* and- Aqua didn’t think she knew any worlds that took that long to cross in a Gummi ship. It took hours to get to new *worlds,* not other cities within them! Maybe these flying machines were very slow?

Their legends did say that their worlds had been united, once. Before the Darkness. Before everything, in the time of fairy tales. Maybe they’d been that large, once.

Maybe they could be again.

Her fingers were turning grey. The waves were nice, but the sound seemed distant, despite them still sitting exactly where they’d been. The Heartless chittered in the darkness, so close now that she could see the occasional flicker of their glowing eyes.

José still sat next to her. He kept trying to make conversation, but the topics felt dim and dull, hard to cling to and harder to keep track of.

She was waiting for someone. The name Sora lingered in her mind. It was important.

Sora.

José muttered about Donald and Panchito. They were looking for him, he swore. They just had to be patient.

She hoped he was right.

How long had she been here waiting? Surely they should have found her by now, right?

They had to be looking for her. They'd- he'd said he would come back for her. Hadn't he?

José said he knew Donald would come for him. He always did. He rescued everyone. No matter what. He'd have to be dead to stop looking. He wasn't worried about it in the slightest.

Aqua wished she had his confidence in his partner. Nobody could save everyone, not every time. Sometimes they needed help.

Sometimes they failed.

Somewhere nearby, a shout echoed across the water. There was someone else nearby.

Two someones.

Aqua stood up, José bouncing with her, tugging her cloak closed and starting towards the noise. It might be the people they were waiting for! Their rescue may be happening already!

She jogged, then ran, the ground puffing up under her feet with clouds of darkness and dust. The waves continued to crash. José huffed beside her, keeping up despite their different lengths of stride.

Ahead, two figures. One, a blond man, and hadn't she met him before?

The other, in a black cloak. Like the one she wore. Mickey had worn one too, she could remember that now. And so did-

She skidded to a halt. That wasn't a friend. That wasn't someone here to get them out of this Realm.

That was Xehanort. Terra's stolen face stared back at her impassively, the other man staring at her with concern.

"So you are still here," he murmured, squinting at her in mild surprise. Aqua fell into a battle stance, but without a Keyblade…

"Are you that eager to die by my hands, Aqua? My old friend?" He asked. His voice was bland, emotionless. She hated it.

"Release my friend, Xehanort!" She demanded, hiding her fear behind determination. José, standing just behind her and to the right, took a long, steady breath.

"Xehanort? I am Xemnas," he said in that same bland tone, turning to look at the other man. "And in truth I have no need of you yet; leave, and I will allow you to persist for a bit longer."

She scowled, and stepped closer. José grabbed her leg, and tugged her back a step. She glanced down, ready to explain in detail why, exactly, she needed this man to be defeated, but-

José's eyes were starting to glow. It wasn't the yellow of a Heartless, but instead a wavering green.

"You will not win, Xemnas," the blond man (Ansem?) said bluntly, glaring. "Your attempts to control the Darkness are feeble, a child's attempt at understanding the cosmos."

Xemnas was unmoved. José's eyes glowed brighter, and his feathers began to shift. A gentle breeze started to ripple Aqua's clothing.

"My plan is already in motion, my opponents scattered and lost. It is *you* that has no understanding of the true power of-" Xemnas began, before he was forcibly thrown towards the waters with a *blast* of air that smelled of dust.

José stepped forwards, fully illuminated now, glowing a green color that seemed just a shade off, flickering between a rotting yellow and a vibrant green that matched his feathers. A sword, not a keyblade but a curved metal blade, appeared in his hand, while the other was held out.

"I think," he said in a voice that whistled and shrieked across the waters, "that is enough of that."

Aqua blinked at him, eyes wide in the unexpected light- she'd never seen magic like this. She'd only ever seen Master Yen Sid cast a spell without a word or some kind of tool; he didn't even have a wand, just

his bare palm.

“Who is this?” Ansem asked, staring down at José. he seemed to be preparing for something- to fight?

“A friend,” Aqua said quickly, waving a hand. “He said he’s looking for his friends-”

Xemnas burst back out of the waves with a roar, water flying in all directions. Aqua dodged back, avoiding most of the spray; José did not. Suddenly drenched in a water that looked as black and stagnant as everything else in this Realm, he looked half Heartless himself. The glowing in his eyes grew more sickly.

“You *dare-”* Xemnas began, water streaming off of him like oil, before another gust of air blasted him still further out to sea; this time, he caught himself, some spell letting him hover over the water. José didn’t hesitate, running forward with a whirl of air beneath his feet that lifted him above the waves and sprinting towards Xemnas with a snarl of his own.

“Aqua,” Ansem grabbed her attention with a frantic shout. “Your friend is harnessing the magic of this Realm; he must be stopped before he succumbs to the Darkness!”

“I don’t have my Keyblade!” Aqua told him, clutching the half-made charm still in her hands. “I can’t even run out there to-”

Xemnas came hurtling back towards them, crashing into the ground with a thud that rattled the ground and a plume of dust that covered her eyes entirely; through the gloom, she could see a sickly yellow glow.

“José! You’re losing yourself to the Darkness!” She screamed, throwing herself forward in a vain hope to stop him. If she could just get close enough-

“Oh, it is not the Darkness I am using,” he told her, voice hard but- not the nasty snarl she’d heard from others. His eyes, despite the glow, were clear, and as Xemnas pulled himself up, he handed her the sword in his hands. “I think this will be faster if we are both armed, yes?”

Aqua hesitated. Just one brief moment of concern.

And then she grabbed the sword.

Her mind *cleared,* for the first time in- twelve years. It had been *twelve years,* and suddenly her memories were vivid and her thoughts unmuddled. The blade sang in her hands, whispering that it was made for defending the weak.

It wasn’t a Keyblade. But it was a blade she could use.

They turned as one to Xemnas, who scowled at them both. When he raised his hands again, a horde of blinking yellow eyes rose from the Darkness; compared to them, José’s were a sharp living green. The wind around them *howled,* and the Heartless fell upon them like a wave onto the rocks.

As one, they lunged into the breach.

The Heartless were never-ending. The sword danced in her hands, eager to fight, but her body grew weak. Tired. The darkness seemed to claw at her energy and mind, even with the clarity of earlier. She was afraid to stop fighting. She was beginning to fear what would happen if they stopped.

José was a whirlwind of green light and movement, and at times she wasn't certain he was still a bird; his form seemed to trail after the movements, like he was more of a bird-shaped gust of wind, clouded with dust and debris.

The water she'd been splashed with refused to dry, or drip off of her; it clung and lingered, and when she caught the briefest of respites she could see it leeching into her clothing.

She'd only been splashed. José had been soaked.

Aqua desperately looked for Xemnas; he was controlling the Heartless, if she could just take *him* out-

But he was gone. So was Ansem.

They're both *gone,* and that meant that she'd lost someone else she should be protecting, meant that there had been a chance to follow him through and they'd *missed it*-

Despair caught in her throat. Hope dwindled in her soul, wilting like a plant with no light.

She'd failed. Ansem was gone, Xemnas had distracted them and left them with a never-ending army to fight and-

A blow caught at her chest, and she stumbled. The sword dropped from her hands to the ground, and her mind choked on the onslaught of Darkness flooding back in. No, no *no,* she had to fight it! She had to survive, had to make it until someone came to save them-

Another blow lifted her clean into the air. A third, slamming into her side, knocked her away from the army.

Straight into the dark waters of the Dark Meridian. Aqua struggled for breath, flailing, looking for the surface-

But was there a surface? In the endless dark and nothing of the Realm of Darkness, there was no light to guide her back up. No indication which way to go. Everything looked the same, there was nothing she could grab, no ground to reach and no air to breathe. The water felt thick, not like water but something heavier, darker, almost alive.

She struggled against- what? Gravity? Hands, dragging her down? Hands trying to drag her *up?*

She couldn't grip them back. Her hands refused to cling to what might be her salvation, and might be her doom. Up or down, she let herself drift, arms falling limp and still beside her.

Above her, as her eyes drifted shut, she saw a glowing yellow form above her, shimmering and wavering in the water.

Then there was nothing but darkness.

No Matter Where He Goes

The portal shuddered and shook, rippling with foreboding energy as Sora dashed through, the lost keyblade of Master Eraqus apparently being the literal key needed to open the door. Donald could honestly say he'd forgotten they'd found it.

Riku had called, desperate for help in handling Aqua, who, apparently, had finally been found in the Realm of Darkness and succumbing fast. He and Mickey couldn't take her down long enough to help, and he was worried they were going to lose her entirely.

It was a place only those who were strong of heart should ever go. The darkness would grab your every pore, every nasty thought and absent annoyance and amplified them until you were overtaken and became another heartless or dark entity, like so many of the people they'd met so far.

Donald watched, and waited. Yen Sid was very particular on this point, nobody that wasn't carrying a Keyblade should ever enter the Realm of Darkness, and for once, Donald wasn't interested in arguing. He knew his limits.

Did he want Sora going in? No. Did he like that Riku and Mickey were already there? Also no! But they were, objectively, the best trained to handle that place specifically, they needed to find Aqua and get her *out of there,* and the faster they did that, the faster they could take out Xehanort and his army and be done with it all.

So. no arguments.

Besides that, he figured that once Sora had gone through, he could steal a Gummi ship and find José. *He* wasn't important in the grand

scheme of things anymore, after all, nobody should care if he ran off on a side quest while they did the more important work.

The King had only needed them to find and protect the Keyblade wielder until he could rejoin them and take over training. Here they were. Sora was being trained, he was as safe as anyone could be here. Donald, and Goofy really, were just cannon fodder for the upcoming Keyblade war.

The portal felt like it was screaming. It wasn't supposed to exist the way it did, the Realm of Darkness. It wasn't supposed to be a *realm* at all; the darkness wasn't true darkness but a *lack* of anything else. Dark because having light would make it real. It was supposed to be the space between spaces, a thing defined by what it wasn't. It was *supposed* to be nothing.

And yet, it existed, persisted. Probably the result of so many people constantly trying to use the power of the void to do things; it didn't want to be power *or* do things, and forcing Nothing to be Something had consequences.

Long lasting consequences. He wondered how long they would have to go without people trying to use the darkness before it went back to some kind of normal.

Donald shuddered, stepping away from the portal; he didn't want to be any closer to that energy than he had to. It felt too similar to the Blot's magic; not the same, not even close, just equally wrong.

Except-

His amulet let out a soft, desperate pulse of fear and concern. Distant. So very very distant.

José. There was no-one else it could be. And there was no other reason it would have happened just *now*.

He didn't have to look. He could feel Panchito behind him; his immediate realization, and his determination in equal measure.

Donald forced his feet to move, Panchito at his heels, and as the portal closed they both tumbled through to the other side. Behind him, a surprised shout cut off before it could be finished, and in front of him, Sora already running forward to aid Riku in a fight against-

Well. That sure was a column of spinning Heartless. A Tower? Tornado? Why was this entire dimension so horrible?

Commanding it, or possibly being commanded *by* it, was a young woman practically bleeding darkness, screaming about being left to die at Mickey. So, that seemed to be Aqua; good, they'd found her. Step one to saving her, done.

The battle was far away already, and spinning farther still. Donald ached to help them, that was his ki- his companion out there and they would need all the help they could get to take down a trained Keyblade master.

But José was here somewhere. Aqua had three people looking out for her, and they could chase them all down to assist later, but José was *alone* and unfamiliar with this realm. He was Donald's priority.

Gods knew he wouldn't be anyone else's, in this dimension. All could be sacrificed to the throne of *Light*.

Donald spared half a glance around them; it was grey and featureless, and seemed to go on forever. Pleasant; Donald would go insane here within an hour, most likely. There was *just* the slightest breeze, possibly coming from the Heartless tornado still just visible on the horizon, and he could swear he almost smelled smoke and salt.

His heart thumped in his chest; he felt like he was burning from the inside out.

“Donal’?” Panchito asked, looking down at him. “Can you speak?”

Donald opened his mouth, and when he didn’t feel magic trying to yank it shut again let out a relieved sigh.

“Seems like it,” he murmured, before he grabbed Panchito by the lapels. “And we are *talking* about you two idiots jumping through an unknown magical portal after me!”

“Ah, but you know how this works! *No matter where he goes~”* Panchito sang, and Donald forced himself not to laugh, shoulders loosening.

“ *We’re always together* ,” he sang back, sighing softly. Then he stepped back and pulled out his staff. “Now hold still, you need magical protection, and then we need to find José so I can yell at you both *together* .”

“Ah, very efficient!” Panchito crowed, laughing, as Donald carefully laid the enchantment over his clothes. Not as great as making them directly, but needs must, and nobody *else* in Yen Sid’s Tower had thought to do so.

Why would they, after all? Panchito wasn't *important* to them. He wasn't a Keyblade wielder, he was just broken-Donald's friend who had appeared when he shouldn't have.

"So many zippers!"

"Yeah, well, it's the fashion around here. That spell takes appearance into account," Donald grumbled, before he shook his head and started looking around. "Now, let's find our missing Cab, shall we?"

Except somehow, he couldn't get a read on the amulet's power. He could feel José, his worry and something darker he couldn't quite name yet, but it felt scattered. He thought maybe they were just too far from him, this realm was *large,* but he'd never had so much trouble just picking a direction to start looking in.

It felt like he was everywhere and nowhere all at once and-

A soft breeze rustled Donald's feathers.

That- there shouldn't be a breeze here. This was a place of nothingness and death, *why was there wind here-*

He tore after the breeze, Panchito next to him. The gentle current became a proper wind, then a gale, then a storm, swirling and *screaming,* how had they not been able to hear it before-

Donald held up a hand, trying to block his face; just in the center of the wind, he could almost make out a figure. Or at least the semblance

of one, a faint chartreuse glow that flickered and wavered as the grey dust whirled around it.

“Joe!” He shouted, hoping the nickname would get a reaction. “You in there?”

A slight movement, almost impossible to make out in the whirlwind.

“José!” Panchito called; his hat was clinging to his jaw for dear life. “Amor, it is time to go! This is a terrible place to be!”

“ *NO.”*

It was less a spoken word and more a howl of wind; it ripped the feathers off of Donald’s face. A trickle of something wet trailed down his cheek.

“No? Not terrible, you mean? You wanna stay here?” Donald retorted, looking around. “Not much to see! Hope it’s not for too long! How will you watch your telenovellas? Where will we put Panchito’s peppers? They need sunshine!”

“And your hammock? It cannot be hung anywhere!” Panchito added. “There is no wood to build with!”

The wind seemed to pause, like it was confused.

“I do think I smelled an ocean though, maybe there’s wood there?” Donald offered, consideringly, watching the light turn just a shade

greener.

“Or a boat!”

“No.” The wind snapped, but it was more of a voice now, the tone irritated. “ *Leave.”*

“Well, we won’t be doing that,” Donald replied, “Now come on, let’s get you out of there. You don’t even have feet! You do remember you’re supposed to have feet, right?”

“And a head! Feathers! A lovely pair of brown eyes!” Panchito continued, taking another step forward. “I love your eyes, amor, please bring them back?”

The wind shifted, swirled, and in the center a body began to form. A head, and feet, and then hands and arms and-

Eyes. Glowing, glaring *yellow* eyes. The darkness around them seemed to chitter with delight.

His heart sank. No. no no no, not José. He couldn't- they couldn’t lose-

No. Donald thought, steadying his feet as the wind shifted from a whirlwind to a raging storm. They’d gotten José back to his body. Now they just needed to bring back his mind.

His feathers reformed, a mix of slate grey and acid green, too vivid to be his own.

“Donal’?” Panchito asked quietly, as the form writhed and continued forming; too large to be José really, wings sprouting from the back and hands clutching at a shadowy version of his Caballero sword.

“Whatever he says,” Donald said slowly, hating how the words tasted in his mouth. “ *Whatever he says,* Pancho, don’t listen. We need to remind him who he is, and he’s not going to want to hear it.”

A low, nasty chuckle.

“Oh, why wouldn’t I?” Not-José asked, standing right before them with a sharp, glowing gaze. “No, please *do* tell me what I should hear from you.”

He twisted to look at Donald directly.

“Perhaps you can tell me about your secret lives? There seem to be so *many!”* He shouted, shoving the air in front of Donald. Donald flew back, the wind blasting at his chest and tearing at his clothing. He landed a few feet away, gasping, barely managing to stay on his feet, not-José following immediately after to continue yelling in his face.

“Secrets and secrets and *lies,* you don’t trust us at all!” He screamed, throwing Donald back again, and again, feet scrambling for purchase against the strangely soft ground. “You want to take care of everything yourself, and you put everyone in danger because you cannot stand not being the hero!”

Donald grunted, trying to tune out the words. He knew this trick; take the things that might bother José and feed them until they were monstrous, fill him with rage at what might have been an annoyance

and hatred at the slightest grudge. They could talk about it when he was *calm,* but it wouldn't do to argue *now.*

That didn't make this hurt any less.

"It was you needing to keep everything to yourself that let the Phantom Blot loose!"

Ignore it. He needed to ignore it.

"You that put us all in danger by destroying everything we could have used to find him!"

Donald winced, and the next blast knocked him clean off his feet; he rolled through the dirt, staff falling from his hands, the taste of rot in his mouth.

"You that nearly got yourself *killed* by that volcano spirit! If you died then all your secrets die with you! You would have left us alone! No answers, no idea what happened! How does it feel knowing you've nearly doomed us all?!"

All Donald could see was the yellow glow, head pounding as he pulled himself to his hands and knees, huffing. Not-José's face in his, snarling; it wasn't an expression he was used to seeing on his face. Even angry, José was cold. Icy and cutting. This wasn't José.

"You think you're the most important person in the universe and we must all concede to your beliefs," he growled. Donald's head was ringing; he thought he might be seeing double. "I have *news* for you, amor, that is *not the case."*

A red blur came from the side, a warbling shout and a surprised gasp as Not-José was knocked away, Panchito panting and holding him to the ground.

“You forgot me,” Panchito said between breaths, grinning darkly. “Don’t leave me out, I want to hear all about Panchito!”

Not-José threw him off, taking the distraction, while Donald got back up, shaking. His hands were burning, his staff was gone somewhere in the gloom, and he didn’t know what they should *do.* Talking a Heartless down had worked maybe twice, ever, but he couldn’t- he couldn’t fight José. Not like this; even if he *found* his staff it wouldn’t be enough power unless he used spells that were just too *dangerous.* For an enemy, fine, but not for this.

The slightest brush of water against his heels. Not-José had nearly thrown him into a dark, dank pool of water that stretched across the horizon. It smelled of nothing, and the feeling of it was strange and oily.

Well, Donald thought, as he took another step back into the water that ran over his skin like the gentle touch of a corpse.

Beggers couldn’t be choosers.

The rush of power washed over him like a tsunami, and it tasted like an eclipse.

Interlude: Sora and the Fascinating Rhythm

Fighting Aqua sucked. For several reasons. First, she was a good person, someone he wanted to be friends with, someone that needed *help*…

(something about fighting her hurt his heart and soul-)

But the *immediate* issue was she was stupid strong and currently controlling an enormous *tower* of Heartless, which was a slight issue.

He and Riku fought *great* together, and King Mickey was a beast, but Sora missed his usual trio. He was just more used to fighting with Donald and Goofy. They had a system, each of them had different attack styles and they worked like a perfect team.

Except his team, turned out, had been lying to him the entire time he'd known them!

He shouldn't dwell on it, not here and not now. The Realm of Darkness wasn't the place for it, and he was here because Riku needed *help,* and Sora couldn't be helpful if he was angry at something else!

But he could barely think of anything *else!* Donald had *kids?!* And this weird… rooster guy!? Who even *was* he, how had he showed up where Kairi and Axel were? And who was the third guy they'd both talked about? He'd gone from feeling like they all knew each other so well, like three peas in a pod, and now?! Now he felt like he didn't know them at all! What other secrets were they keeping?

Sora trusted him, trusted them both, and now he finds out they didn't

tell him *anything*-

-what was that?

Sora took a risk and glanced backwards. Beyond their battle, the Dark Meridian was *angry* . The waters, perpetually dark and endlessly washing gently over the shore, were roiling. Waves rising and crashing, the sound growing to compete with the screaming vortex of Heartless.

A sign of something worse coming?

He had to turn back to the fight for a time, losing himself in the weight of the Keyblade and the Heartless in front of him. He couldn't afford to be this distracted, they had to free Aqua so they could free Ventus and Roxas and defeat Xehanort for good.

He hoped they could do it. They had to. She couldn't be gone; people that were strong of heart could fight off the Darkness, they just needed to get the Heartless tower thing away from her and get *her* out of the Realm of Darkness long enough for her to remember who she was-

Okay, the waves were seriously loud-

Sora glanced back again, wondering what else could be coming, if Xehanort or one of the remaining Organization members was trying to catch them unaware, but.

He didn't… think that was an Organization power.

The water was glowing.

The black, oily, unearthly water was *glowing* a brilliant, deep blue. For a moment, Sora was home again. Feet planted in the sand, waters flowing around his waist, and the water glowing. Bioluminescence, his mom had told him later. There were things in the water that glowed when you disturbed them.

No, sweetie, it doesn't hurt them; they're just saying hello!

When had he last seen her…? Did she even remember him?

Then he was back in the present; the ground was dry and dusty, not sand, and there was no water-

No, actually, there *was* water around his feet. It was rushing back towards the ocean though.

It was rushing back *fast*-

Shit.

"We need to get away from the water!" He screamed a warning, but the noise was deafening, nobody heard him-

Sora tore forward, feet splashing and then slipping on the ground, wet and cold, diving for Riku and Mickey, who were near each other, probably talking about something, didn't matter-

He shoved Mickey under one arm, grabbed Riku by the hand, and kept running, ignoring their yelling, ignoring the swirling tornado of heartless that followed them-

"Sora, what are you *doing-"*

The water was rushing towards them again; he could hear it, over the pounding in his head, and he dared look back as the sound rose to a deafening rush-

The glowing tsunami slammed into the Heartless vortex. Heartless screaming, Anti-Aqua screaming somewhere, *he* was screaming, he thought, but not a drop hit them. Sora stopped, letting Mickey down awkwardly, and turned to face the scene fully.

The tsunami seemed to pause, retreat, then come back *again,* hitting the tower before rushing on in another direction, like it was alive-

Atop the wave was a small figure. Sora couldn't see much, but he could see white feathers.

"Donald?"

"What are you *doing* here?!" Mickey screamed, and he sounded terrified.

The figure glanced at them.

Their eyes were glowing a dark, vivid blue.

“You guys help Aqua,” Donald called, in a voice that was waves crashing into the rocks and seagulls crying above the bay. “We’ve got this one.”

This one…?

Sora looked in the direction that the water was going, a spinning typhoon that Donald was *riding,* that was so *cool,* and saw what looked like a thunderstorm further off.

Except lightning wasn’t usually quite that *green* .

“Donald!” Mickey shouted, but Donald turned away and kept going. “Donald, get back here- who’s *we?!”*

“Okay, since when can Donald control water like that?!” Sora demanded, even as he turned to face what was left of the Heartless with renewed energy. “What other secrets is he keeping?!”

“Ah ha… secrets?” Mickey asked awkwardly, eyes going wide; Sora blinked at him with a narrowed gaze, but couldn’t react before they were back in action.

Still, he couldn't help but remember that Goofy and Yen Sid said they needed the King to explain things.

Who else was keeping secrets from him?

The Heartless seemed *endless,* and Sora was too distracted to do more than keep pushing through. Just one more, and one more and one more after that.

He hoped Mickey had a plan. He was the one that had met Aqua before, he hopefully had some ideas for talking her down once they broke through enough of the Heartless to *get* to her; she kept shifting away, disappearing into the gloom like she'd never been there at all.

When she was visible she wasn't very interested in talking. Mostly in screaming. Sometimes attacking. Always angry. Mickey kept trying, though, reminding her of her life, and her friends, and this wasn't her-

It did seem to be making a bit of an impact, at least. After the first few attempts, anyway. She paused longer, staring, like she was trying to remember who they were. Why they were here, trying to help her.

When she paused, her skin seemed to drip, like the grey tone was a film of oil or mud on her skin, and starting to run off. It gave Sora hope they could-

A roaring mass of water and sharp howling wind slammed into the ground nearby, and from it two figures emerged. Donald, dripping with water that seemed like more of that oily darkness Aqua was covered in, black streaks streaming from his still-glowing eyes-

And another bird, a parrot with feathers that were a murky yellow-green-grey, was *everyone* soaked in this water? His eyes glowed a nasty yellow, not quite like the Heartless but *way* too close, and he snarled and dove at Donald again, the wind rising to throw them together. Donald gestured, so the water rose to catch him, and they

were thrown away again, the noise too much to make out if either of them were speaking.

“Sora!” Another voice- the rooster guy was running up, panting, watching the whirlwind with wide eyes. “Ah, I’m glad you were not hit! They are really going at it!”

“Is that *normal?!”* Sora shrieked, because the guy didn’t seem *nearly* as worried as he should be.

“Not very! But Donald is being very careful to not hurt José, and it seems our José is returning the favor!”

Sora looked again, watching the screaming storm. He didn’t think they were pulling their punches, but what did he know?

“If he’s not trying to hurt him, what *is* he doing?” He had to ask.

“Tire him out,” Panchito replied carefully, eyes on the storm. “And remind him who he is; it is easy to lose yourself in the magic and the hurt."

“But I have another idea, I think, if you can help me?”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Sora asked, holding the Keyblade out straight in front of him.

Panchito, at the other end of the blade, nodded.

“Si! I cannot use my normal abilities here, and as you can see-”

He was interrupted by another raging scream of wind and Donald shooting past them; still glowing.

“-Donald needs some help in getting through to José!” He finished.

“And this will… work?”

“I think so!”

Well. Who was Sora to question Donald’s *other* friend?

“Alright… *Flare!”*

The fireball left the blade in a rush of warmth and light in the dark realm, shooting straight at Panchito, lighting up his feathers in a brilliant scarlet, before it hit-

His hands?

No, he *caught the fire,* holding it between his palms, and as Sora watched, his eyes lit up *red,* the feathers on his head flaring like the edges were catching on fire themselves, flickering and beginning to glow as well. The fire didn't so much go out as melt into his hands, leaving streaks of light flickering up his arms.

“Ah…” he said, and the sound was the crackle of flame. “Thank you, I think that should do.”

Sora took a step back, starting to wonder if he’d made a mistake. What if Donald had frozen earlier because he was being *controlled?* Threatened?

What had he done?

Panchito stepped back and with a musical cry that seemed to echo for miles, piercing and triumphant, he *launched* into the air *,* shooting from their location towards the roaring typhoon fight and leaving a streak of light in his wake.

When he arrived, there was the boom of thunder and the screech of steam and crackling flame. The sky seemed to lighten, like the gloom of the Realm of Darkness was being lit from below- surely the fire wasn’t that bright?

The Heartless returned; he had to focus on the fight, but it was kinda hard to focus on this when there was another giant battle going on *right next to them-*

He took a blow to the blade guard and skidded backwards, closer to the edges of the ocean that were still flowing up and towards Donald in a strange, gravity defying dance.

Donald was there, panting, still glowing and looking worn out and distressed; a gem Sora had never seen before gleamed from a chain on his chest. Everything about him was dripping dark and strange, and Sora had the strangest feeling, standing next to him, of being in the center of a hurricane.

Their eyes met, and Donald's face went soft, and apologetic; it was a familiar expression in the strangeness of his tar-stained face. Sora scowled, but it was hard to hold the grudge in the moment; he was too distracted by the fight and the weirdness of everything else.

"You owe me the truth, later," he grumbled anyway, hauling himself back to his feet. Donald nodded, carefully, like he needed to work to do it.

"I promise," he swore, and Sora-

Well. Donald may have been lying about his life, or at least not telling everything. But he'd never broken a promise, had he?

He hoped not, anyway.

"So… you guys need help?" Sora offered; he thought Mickey had been having some luck with Aqua, and they were so close to each other he could probably do both. But Donald shook his head.

"This one's personal, but we've got it," he said, before he glanced back at the ocean behind them (and did the water look… cleaner? Or was that just the glowing thing?) "In fact, I have an idea."

Sora hopped back a step as Donald raised a hand, no staff, and the light got even brighter, casting an unearthly blue glow on everything around them.

"Dance, water, dance," Donald hissed with a dark grin, and a dozen

water clones rose to meet them.

Sora didn't get to see what Donald's plan *was,* he needed to focus on keeping the Heartless away from Aqua and Mickey while he tried to reason with her, but the noise from the battle was so distracting-

Except now he was hearing something other than roaring forces of nature. It sounded like- music?

Music. Something happy and jumping and- familiar?

Sora was pretty sure his world had had music, before the Keyblade events started. Stuff that was recorded, not just live, but his memories were… fuzzy. Not distant, like he'd just forgotten overtime, but off, like when he tried to remember Castle Oblivion. Like they'd been erased, or buried.

And there were the Atlantica concerts, sure, and Corona's festival, but…

The parrot guy was yelling something about how 'that wasn't going to work this time!' Which, if Sora knew anything about people drenched in darkness, meant it was going to work on them. If it really wasn't going to work, they either laughed or ignored whatever it was.

Which, in this case, was apparently using the fire and water to make some kind of light show and playing a guitar instead of fighting. Sora could even see Donald laughing a bit, as he waved his arms to move the water around them in thin streams and splashing waves. The water clones jumped and dove, holding… instruments? Would those even work?

Donald's eyes were still bleeding darkness like tears, streaking down his white feathers and dissolving as they hit the open air under his chin. His clothes were streaked in black and blue like someone had painted over his entire body with a paintbrush. His feathers seemed to ripple.

" *... blame it on the rhythm of…"*

Was that Donald singing…?

The Heartless swarmed.

"You take a small cabassa!"

Aqua was distracted, looking at the light show to the side, and Mickey got closer. Close enough to talk instead of yell, begging her to listen, that he'd been trying to get back to her-

"One pandeiro!"

Panchito had grabbed José into a twirl, the parrot snarling back but still moving in tune; it looked like he wasn't even aware he was doing it. The light flickered and flashed around them, washing their feathers in a rainbow of colors that lit the ground and swirling waters around them. Donald had thin ribbons of water twirling around them like a bird cage, all spiraling lines and glowing light; his entire body seemed to ripple through the distorted reflections.

"Take the cuíca!"

Aqua was properly frazzled now, trying to yell at Mickey but the Heartless were faltering in her control; they were falling faster to Riku and Sora's blades, and instead of reforming into the tower they were coming at them solo, disorganized and confused.

Donald and Panchito switched; the water continued swirling, but now Panchito was tossing flames at different speeds and in different colors around, making the lights flash differently, hollering the lyrics.

José seemed to regain some of his focus, shoving Donald away; the waters thrashed, and Sora lost sight of them for a minute, having to focus on the fight he was actually *in* instead of the strange musical one around them.

"You've got the fascinating rhythm of the samba!" Donald and Panchito crowed together, spinning José between them. The guy looked confused and a bit greener (hopefully that was his natural coloring and not just nausea…), feet stepping in time and eyes darting between the other two like he wasn't quite certain they were there. They danced together for a moment, perfectly in sync, and the whirlwind shifted to something less violent, more of a bracing wind than a stormy gale.

Aqua's foot tapped; the Heartless shifted restlessly, losing their form entirely and attacking one on one from the dancing shadows. They turned to look at the magic storm, then Aqua, Riku and Sora, then back again, like they weren't sure who they were supposed to be paying attention to. Some stopped attacking entirely, vanishing in the strange gloom.

" *And if the guitars are strumming…"* Panchito started, spinning away again to strum his own guitar. Sora wanted to snap to the beat; it *was* catchy.

“Birds are humming,” Donald added loudly, and somehow he didn’t sound as screechy as he usually did; he was still holding José’s hands, who was starting to gain some color and the glow of his eyes was growing to a brighter, cleaner green.

“Drums are drumming!” King Mickey called out, looking surprised at himself, face flushing. Riku let out a startled laugh, hand slamming over his mouth before he continued fighting; Aqua cracked the smallest of smiles, and her face seemed just a bit brighter.

“*… then you can blame it…”* Donald and Panchito sang together, leaning together in an exaggerated sprawl, José dragged between them.

“ *On the rhythm of the samba!”*

Three voices. José’s eyes were bright, and the blackened color was draining off of him like oil on water and a growing lightness in his face as he looked around.

Sora had to look away to defend himself, the Heartless snapping at his distracted side, but somewhere in the back of his head he noted that he didn’t think he’d ever seen Donald that happy. Ever.

It hurt, in a deep place in his chest.

He ignored it. They still needed to rescue Aqua.

Except Aqua was fully distracted, now. She wasn’t commanding the

Heartless, or fighting Mickey, or even really paying them any attention. She was just staring at the others.

No, wait, just José, who was laughing and was playing an umbrella like a trumpet and dancing closer and closer-

And as the full blast of noise really *hit,* Sora felt himself smiling. He couldn't help it; the tune was just *fun.*

Donald and Panchito were still playing. The water clones were too, each one rippling with the differently colored lights.

"José?" Aqua asked, head tilting slightly. "Are- what's going on?"

Her eyes seemed to be clearing up, the color returning. SHe looked around.

"What's… is this real?"

"I told you Donald and Panchito would come," José told her with a smile, sliding closer. "And see! Your friends are here too!"

Sora felt his heart *leap* when her eyes met his. Some part of his soul just knew her, loved her, and he didn't- this had to be Ventus. It was *Ventus* that was feeling that joy at seeing his friend, looking so much calmer and herself, eyes bright and so very, very blue.

"Sora…?" She asked cautiously, face brightening as the color fully came back to her face; it was like she was *glowing* in the darkness.

“You’re Sora!”

“Hi Aqua,” he said, and it felt like there were two voices in his mouth at once. “Nice to-”

Meet you? But no, he had met her before. A long, long time ago.

“-see you again.”

She smiled wider.

Around them, the lights continued to flicker, and the band, which had never *stopped* playing, he realized, played louder as they reached a crescendo.

The three birds all hopped together again to holler the last lyrics that seemed to echo across the darkness in triumph.

“ *You’ve got the fascinating rhythm of the samba!”*

Interlude: Scrooge: Creaking Walls

Scrooge stared at his phone. It was a new habit, lately. Using the thing in general, really, but with the kids always sending him things, it had become a habit to check periodically. Even if he didn't get half of what they sent him. He was *fairly* sure it was a good thing that they kept sending him strange jokes and images. It meant they wanted to include him!

Or that he was the butt of the joke, but sometimes he was still so grateful that he was even a part of their lives he was fine being the joke. At least it meant they wanted him in the joke in some way.

But the obsession, that was newer. And since the kids were with Della camping, and therefore had no way to reach him at the moment, he had to admit it was exclusively Donald he was hoping would reach out. He would be home soon, and Scrooge was tentatively hopeful they could actually talk, with everyone else out doing their own things.

He could easily admit he'd been a touch… off, lately. He didn't know how else to put it, so just off. He could easily point to *when,* at least; the moment that fire had hit Donald. The slowly dawning realization that he was about to watch his beloved nephew burn to ashes.

Alright, off was a fairly benign word for it, but if he let himself think about things too much… he couldn't focus. He couldn't *think.* So off it was, because that was tolerable. He could focus on *solutions* this way, and that was far more valuable than thinking about why he needed them.

So, the solvable issue: Donald wasn't around as often as Scrooge would like, and seemed stressed and distant when he was around. Besides the… obvious point, and their years of estrangement, there

was also the issue with the Phantom Blot, which seemed to be eating up quite a bit of Donald's focus. And that, that was something he could potentially fix, so that was where he would focus his attention.

Because this version of Donald, it shook Scrooge. Donald could be nervous and twitchy on an adventure, when the danger was potential but not yet realized, when all sounds and sights were the threat hovering over the horizon, but he always buckled down when the danger became *real.*

Their brief meeting before he'd left for Costa Rica ran through Scrooge's mind, while he looked through it for any hints about what was happening. Donald's focus had been speaking to the children. Not Della. Not Scrooge. He rarely seemed to bother; seemed to think their reactions were something to handle last, when he could simply leave. The children were, as always, his priority. This time had been no different. He hadn't seemed overly concerned about the trip itself, *that* had come during the phone call later.

Della, bless and blast that girl, had called him enough he answered, despite clearly being in the middle of the workday, but he'd quickly been distracted by something that Scrooge couldn't hear.

Scrooge understood, he really did, he would *also* like to get Donald back onto adventures. Preferably one that ended a bit more successfully.

Well. He supposed Donald surviving *had* been a success. But perhaps something more like a treasure and a good story, instead. A sailing trip? Donald would love to take the kids sailing, he was certain…

Regardless, Donald could *not* be distracted at work. Scrooge had ripped Della a new one for it, though he'd had to claim it was simply rude and likely to get Donald in trouble. Della had asked why he

couldn't just hire Donald *himself,* and to that, Scrooge couldn't really give an answer. He wouldn't *mind,* honestly even their short lunch the other day had ended up the highlight of his week, Beaks or no, but Donald would. Wouldn't like feeling like Scrooge was coddling him. That it was a point of pity.

Or worse, condescension.

Scrooge let himself think of his own father, and sighed. No, it would certainly be taken in the worst light; he would feel the same if his father offered him work. Donald was a grown man, he liked to know he'd earned his own way. As much as Scrooge had otherwise done wrong, he was certain that Donald's self reliance was a boon. You couldn't always rely on outside help, even the ones closest to you. You *needed* to be able to stand on your own two feet.

Though he wished it hadn't gone as far as it had. For Donald. For himself. Della seemed to have a better balance, maybe a touch too far in the other direction but certainly capable on her own if need be.

"-I probably would have gotten shot earlier-"

No, Donald was *far* too independent now, if he couldn't just tell Scrooge what in the blazes *that* was about- surely his coworkers were capable of being trusted in a firefight?! If he was in a situation where that could happen, he needed people around him that could handle it. Scrooge had said plenty about those lads of his, but they at least seemed trustworthy, to hear Donald speak of their own adventures.

But this *Clyde* seemed like a waste of space and a threat to whatever it was they were trying to accomplish. What *that* was, Scrooge could only guess, but the hints he had painted only a few possible pictures. The hours, the travel, and Donald's focus on some kind of investigation that had bullets flying, they all pointed to something

Scrooge didn't like. Nor did he like the effect it had wrought on his nephew.

This was a Donald with real danger around him. The focus, the paranoia, constantly checking in and yet unreachable and unbothered by his own safety besides the basics. There was a very real fear there, and it meant that he was far deeper than Scrooge had believed. And he doubted it had been *unwilling,* but he still felt some rage at the fact that someone was clearly helping pull him deeper.

Donald was a *parent,* he had responsibilities, surely they could lean on someone else? *Anyone* else?

Of course, he doubted his lad would accept that. He wouldn't allow himself to be pushed back from something he already felt responsible to fix.

He loved Donald, he really did. But his ability to make everything, good or bad, his fault and his problem somehow was almost impressive. If it wasn't so *infuriating.*

Their family was just getting themselves back together. Largely by Donald's hand, even! Scrooge could openly admit that it had been Donald's efforts, with the boys, with Scrooge, and with Gladstone and Fethry lately, that had pulled them all back to town. Fethry had been staying with Gladstone for the last few days and was talking about studying marine biology nearby!

With all the effort Donald had gone through to get everyone together, Scrooge just couldn't understand why he couldn't ask them for *help,* sometimes. Surely he realized this went both ways by now?

If not from Scrooge himself, then from his cousins? His sister?

Lord, Scrooge hoped he was at least willing to lean on the two- alright, José and Panchito. He would have to get used to them; they were having a child together, and he'd invited them into his home. Built them a suite even.

Which he was sitting in. *Had* been sitting in, looking at the plethora of empty frames sitting on the table. He would love to find some family photos to put in them, but it seemed too forward. He didn't know what photos Donald would like, here. Some of the same ones as the boat? Were those favorites? Or would he want different ones, so every space he lived in had new memories to look at?

Maybe they were color coordinated or something. Scrooge wouldn't know. It wasn't like he and Donald talked about things like that.

He wanted to. When Donald got back, maybe he would ask.

He should get him some art. Beakley had mentioned it, said that a painting would make the room feel a touch homier without being too presumptive. Just a piece or two. They had some paintings and whatnot in storage, surely he had a seascape or art of a ship.

Perhaps a watercolor, or something more colorful? He'd noticed much brighter artwork in that cabana; brilliant landscapes and sunsets. Or would it be rude to imply he'd been looking for hints when they'd been there?

He didn't think he'd been this *off* in many years. How was he supposed to balance all of these different concerns and people without offending one or another? He didn't even know for certain they *would* be offended, and that was trouble on its own, but he knew he was on thin ice. With José in particular. The parrot hadn't said anything since

that first apology, but he'd been clear that he had not forgiven Scrooge for the call.

And perhaps more. What would Scrooge know? He hadn't even noticed Donald had been dating them in college; clearly he wasn't as sharp as he liked to think.

He wandered out of the room and back to the Manor at large. The kids and Della were out, and Beakley, as she often did when the kids were gone, had gone off for personal time of some description. She claimed it was none of his business when he'd asked, and she was right, but he suspected she was doing something a touch more serious than seeing a masseuse.

SHUSH, he suspected, had come calling. With FOWL back on the horizon, they were probably reaching out to any resources they had to try and get ahead before FOWL could get themselves properly rooted again. Sure, they hadn't called *Scrooge,* but he was visible, busy and had only ever done a small number of direct missions. Beakley was a better resource to call in.

But he did miss being in the loop. Perhaps he could ask Beakley for information, if only to be on the same page for any actions to protect the family.

Scrooge continued to wander, since there was nobody to notice him doing so. Manor was empty, after all.

He walked down to the beach. It was becoming a familiar route; a short walk, lit by painted runestones and the lanterns Beakley had insisted on. He would *never* admit it, but he did like the lights. Despite the cost. They made the two spaces feel like they were all connected. A few homes all on the same property, just a few minutes away. Other side of the yard, that was all.

Down at the beach, they had a proper few homey spaces now. Gladstone's bungalow, with the garden he'd apparently been spending all his time in. Beach chairs, a few umbrellas. He'd heard them talking about creating some kind of platform for dancing, since the kids wanted to do their lessons outside while the weather was nice.

Donald's car was parked where it had been this entire trip, just up near the road; he'd caught a ride to the airport, to avoid any fees from leaving the car there. It still gave Scrooge a moment of hope, before it was dashed when he realized there were no new tire marks from someone dropping him off.

The dock, with Donald's boat bobbing about in the waves. It was dark, which felt so very strange; even when he wasn't home, Scrooge would swear at least one of the kids was there any given time. The lights were rarely out.

Mitzy the giant krill was here, this time, partially beached and resting in the sun. Which meant Fethry was probably around here somewhere. It was pleasantly strange to have him nearby again.

But neither he nor Gladstone was visible right at the moment, so Scrooge continued onto the dock, eventually sitting himself down at the far end to watch the waves. It was possibly the least productive thing he'd done in some time, but he couldn't say what he *ought* to be doing. He was well ahead of all of McDuck Industries current projects, the investor party had many of their other activities on pause while they prepared; Donald's band had said they would play, and confirmed a rough song list. Which, apparently, was standard for hiring a band. Usually Scrooge wouldn't handle that part directly, but it had felt important to handle it this time. The rest of the planning was going fine, he wasn't involved, and with the rest of the family out, he was stuck thinking.

Donald should already be home. That was all he *could* think right now. Donald was supposed to be home today. Had texted briefly to confirm he had reached the first of his connecting flights, so he hadn't been delayed by work again.

And then, nothing. The time his flight should have landed had come and gone. Even accounting for a delayed flight, he should be home. And surely if he'd had something canceled, he would have called? Perhaps he wouldn't call Scrooge, but Beakley? Launchpad? Someone, at least. Someone to tell everyone at home that he was going to be late. That he'd had to go straight back to work, maybe. Or had to go back to Costa Rica for something. Or that Tibet thing he'd mentioned?

Something. Anything.

He set his phone back in his pocket.

The waves were pleasant enough. He could sit and watch the sunset. He rarely bothered sitting and watching the sunset.

Sure, it was only mid afternoon, but he had time. He was ahead of work (and the Buzzards had chased him off, to plan the blasted party to *their* standards). The kids were off with Della. Donald was-

He had time.

The waves were nice.

But what if he just tried calling *one* time? He could do that!

He pulled the phone back out.

It went to voicemail.

“Hello, lad! Just, ah- we expected you in already. Wanted to make sure your flight landed fine. I’m sure you’re just busy, or still in the air, but if you want to let us know you’re back, that would… be appreciated.”

He ended the call. He had no idea why this was so *hard.*

“Hey Uncle McDunkle!”

Scrooge turned slightly, but Gladstone had already sat down next to him with a groan. He wasn’t in his usual jacket, just a plain shirt with rolled up sleeves and a wide-brimmed hat.

“Working on the back garden, didn’t see you. Lemonade?” He asked, offering up a sealed red cup with a straw. It clinked as he moved, and he had a matching one with green clovers embossed over it.

“ …thanks lad.”

The lemonade was perfect; sweet, but not too sweet, tart and ice cold. Scrooge felt a small smile cross his face; it was Elvira’s recipe, he could tell. Nice to know Gladstone had learned it. It made her loss feel a bit less.

He'd lost many people, over the years. Seeing their echoes in their children and grandchildren softened the blow, sometimes.

"Soo… don't usually see you down here. Alone," Gladstone said awkwardly, shifting to lean against the post, letting one leg dangle and tucking the other to his chest. Scrooge shrugged.

"Got too used to the chatter; kids are out with Della still, and I got tired of hearing the walls creak," he found himself admitting. He couldn't quite say why, but Gladstone was nodding thoughtfully, so it was too late to take back.

"Yeah, it's a big place. Bet it gets quiet," he said. "Don's not back yet, I take it? Thought he was landing today, did he have to go right back to work?"

Scrooge snorted in surprise. Apparently he wasn't the only one wondering. That was… something. Positive, he thought. Something positive.

"Haven't heard yet. I know he caught the first connection flight, nothing after that," he explained. Gladstone frowned, and tugged a phone out with his free hand. His feathers were streaked with dirt, Scrooge noticed.

Gladstone scrolled through something, tapping away and frowning deeper and deeper.

"No notices about a delayed or canceled flight, no issues noted on their website; his plane landed *hours* ago…" Gladstone muttered, continuing to tap away, before scowling. "Don, what's the point of sharing your location if…?"

“Donald shared his… what?”

“Yeah, it's a thing you can do, give access to your phone location to someone else in case of whatevers. He usually turns it off when he’s working, musta forgotten this time, but-”

He stopped speaking, eyebrows shooting up. He glanced at Scrooge, then shrugged, oh-so-casual.

“I, ah- he probably just went straight to work when he got back or something. Might have had to report in, since his whole thing is about confidential paperwork!”

Scrooge’s eyes narrowed. Gladstone was plenty of things, but a good liar he was *not*.

“Why don’t you try calling him,” he suggested, biting back genuine annoyance to something… smarmy, at best. Maybe just rude. “If it’s just paperwork, he can at least answer, confirm he’s landed already.”

“Sure,” Gladstone agreed easily enough. So he didn’t expect Donald to ignore his call… was he lying about Donald’s location? Scrooge didn't know where his work was, precisely, but it would have to be in Duckburg, so was he *not* there? But where else would he be, that Gladstone wasn't worried about it any longer? He wouldn’t have any reason to hide if he was injured, so that ruled out hospitals, his partners’ home was both a reasonable place for him to go and magically linked to *this* home, so if he was there surely Gladstone would have just said so.

The phone rang. And rang. And just when he was about to guess

Gladstone would go to voicemail as well, there was a click. Scrooge felt some relief, until…

" *Hello?"*

That wasn't Donald.

"Uh, hi! Why do you have my cousin's phone?" Gladstone asked. And wasn't that interesting. His tone was *dangerous.* Scrooge genuinely couldn't say he'd heard that before.

" *Oh! He left it here? On the table. Normally I would have left it, but that was the second call that came in, was worried there might be an emergency…"* The man on the other end said cautiously. " *He got pulled into… something, not sure when he'll be back."*

"Well, can you tell him to call us when he can? We hadn't heard his flight had landed yet!" Gladstone said, calmer now.

" *Of course, of course! Yeah, it's a bit chaotic here, he probably got distracted when he landed is all,"* the man confirmed, also sounding calmer. Scrooge felt suspicion gather along his spine. The way they both were talking was awfully vague. Like they each knew a secret.

But maybe he was just being paranoid; Donald's job was largely confidential, he'd said, so naturally a coworker wouldn't want to say much. Gladstone might just be trusting his gut that the person would have stumbled and told the truth if there was a secret to be kept.

He wanted to push anyway. Grab the phone and demand answers. Who was the person on the other end, where was Donald, what did he

get ‘pulled into’ and with who?

But he didn’t. He watched as Gladstone hung up and shoved the phone back into his pocket, utterly relaxed again. He sipped his lemonade.

“If you could see his ‘location,’ why didn’t you just say he was back at work?” He asked with a frown.

“Hm? Oh, not sure that’s his work building or, like, offsite storage or something. I don’t actually know where his building is,” Gladstone replied absently, picking dried mud off his arms with a frown.

“Hmm.”

Gladstone glanced at him, and his frown deepened.

“You alright? You’re looking kinda grumpier than usual,” he said. Head tilted just to the side. It was the same look Donald had when he was suspicious. The same look Dewey shared, now, all just at that angle.

“Hmph. He could have said he was going back to work. Or at least kept his phone on him,” Scrooge grumbled, scowling out at the horizon so he didn’t have to look at Gladstone’s face.

“Guessing he just got distracted. He probably texted the kids and didn’t think to tell anyone else,” Gladstone replied simply. “You know he would, Unk, Donald’s got blinders on when it comes to the kids, but after that? It’s like he forgets about the rest of us, half the time.”

“He ought to keep at least one person updated that’s *here,* ” Scrooge retorted. “You or Beakley would do, if- well, one of you two is usually here, and at least we’d know if someone needed to go give him a ride.”

“Yeah, well, maybe we make that a rule or something. Anyone traveling keeps someone at home base in the loop. Would be nice for your business trips and Fethry’s, well, anythings, too. Half the time I go up the hill and it’s deserted,” Gladstone agreed, going back to his feathers with a grimace. “Ugh, forgot how hard it was to wash mud off.”

“Aren’t your feathers oiled properly? That shouldn’t be sticking at all!” Scrooge found himself lecturing; Gladstone rolled his eyes.

“Yes, *mum,* I’ll get right on that. The oil gland isn’t easy to reach, and I lost my brush in the move.”

“Then I’ll bloody well *help* you, what are you even trying to do there?!” Scrooge demanded, tugging Gladstone’s arms away from his beak, where he was chewing through some of the muddy layers and shredding the feathers underneath. “I know your gran taught you how to preen, you’re just going to rip them out at that rate! Come on now.”

He’d dragged his nephew halfway to his bungalow before his mind caught up to what he was doing. Which was, apparently, forcing Gladstone to preen properly.

He paused, glancing back at Gladstone who, in turn, was staring at him in complete surprise, eyes wide and beak slack.

“Ah, well. If you want help, I suppose. Could wait to ask Della or Fethry instead,” he offered, but now Gladstone was dragging *him,* almost frantic.

“Nope, nope you offered! And usually Donald helps, he’s just been gone a while; Della’s too impatient and Fethry tugs too hard,” he chattered as he continued pulling all the way into his living room, before leaving Scrooge standing frozen in pace to run off, shouting about a wash rag.

Well, Scrooge thought as he carefully sat down on the dark leather couch. Well, this was as good a distraction as any. Just until the rest of the family got home; Gladstone would make good company, at least.

He carefully removed his hat and set it aside, knowing from experience it would just get in the way. It had been quite some time since he’d preened anyone but himself.

Longer still since he’d been *asked.* Or, in this case, demanded, but he *had* offered. And it was a nice enough way to pass the time. He could do worse than talking to Gladstone for a bit longer.

Interlude: Mickey - Long Live The King

Mickey hadn't been born a King. But he'd learned fast, what Disney needed in one. Someone decisive. Brave. Fearless, even, willing to go into the breach to risk everything for a drop of hope and light.

The look in the Queen's eyes, when he'd stepped through… the amount of *awe,* like he'd personally stepped down from Heaven to answer her desperate pleas…

It had taken time to convince Minnie he was just a person. Harder still, because Mickey had to project what Disney needed while he was flying by the seat of his pants. Keyblades, multiple worlds, Heartless and hearts and villains monologuing about the fate of the worlds. He'd been in a state of panic, teleporting and flying wherever he could to seek training and guidance. Master Yen Sid had been a godsend, aware of Disney's methods for handling the Darkness and helping fill in the gaping holes in Mickey's knowledge of the world and what he was supposed to be doing there.

The first summons had been the one where he swore fealty and began to train, but it was the second where anything really *happened.* The growing dark had worried Minnie, stars starting to go out as worlds succumbed to the Unversed, and then the Heartless as Ansem's experiments got out of control.

He hadn't known what Minnie meant when she said he could request help. She'd shown him the statues of other heroes; Mages and Knights and Advisors, but he hadn't *known.* Hadn't realized that he wasn't summoning someone from Disney, he was reaching back *home.* Dragging others in after him to the same strange world and its endless war against the dark.

Had he not done it, he may have just stayed permanently. He had a

life back home, true, but he could have one here too. Something worth more than his acting career. And Minnie… he would have stayed just for her. But the summons had brought Donald and Goofy to him. Something about compatible lives and hearts.

Mickey had never quite gotten over the guilt, that he could have orphaned Max without even *knowing.* He'd sent the summons, but soon got dragged back into investigating Ansem's reports and left before they'd arrived. Minnie had handled their arrival, but she of course didn't know they knew each other. How could she? She told them the King needed them to help, and they had, and when they'd actually *seen* each other again-

Goofy had been ecstatic that it was him. That they were all together again, at least for that moment.

Donald, though, he'd been more pragmatic. Lectured Mickey about using spells he didn't fully understand, what if he'd drawn in someone *else,* and Mickey had been too happy to see his friend again to really listen. Donald was always Donald, worried about this and that thing, were they safe, why were the chosen Keyblade wielders always *children* (well, okay, Mickey didn't like it either, but apparently the Light was strongest with children), why had the spell chosen *them.*

He also seemed to hate the secrecy. It had been pounded into Mickey's head, that they couldn't risk the source of Disney's protectors being known. Not a soul could know the truth, nobody except the Queen (who summoned them) and Master Yen Sid, who was a retired member of an Order of Keyblade wielders as old as the Summon spell itself, and knew what Disney's role was in the war against the Darkness. He'd repeated it ad nauseam to them in turn; no mentions whatsoever of anything to do with their world.

The other two hadn't argued once Mickey had spelled out his concerns. They hadn't said a word, in fact. Yen Sid had said they would follow his orders, but Mickey knew his friends, and it seemed…

odd. But so long as they were on the same page, it was fine.

But it made the current situation all the harder to handle. *How* in the world had Donald's two partners, who were in *no way whatsoever* involved with Kingdom Hearts, end up here?! Here especially; how had José landed in the *Realm of Darkness?* And Panchito in Merlin's pocket dimension, somehow! What had Donald even been *doing* ?! Mickey knew magic, had studied it; *that* had been something else. Something… more. And he couldn't ask without revealing something!

He was possibly muttering this to himself as José and Aqua, who had apparently found each other before succumbing to the dark, were cheerfully reuniting. Panchito was introducing himself to Riku, still glowing red with some kind of spell, and Donald-

Donald looked like he was *bleeding* darkness, even crying it in thick black streams. His face was streaked in it, outlining his face in a strange mask. He was frowning, panting, but otherwise seemed calm. He kept rubbing at the front of his shirt.

Behind them, the waters he'd been magically controlling (...somehow?) were still glowing and rippling. The air felt cleaner and warmer than it had ever been here and something was terribly wrong with how not-wrong the place felt for once.

Mickey had been trapped here before. It wasn't supposed to feel comfortable.

He gave up and stomped over to Donald.

"What is going on?!" He hissed, hoping that the louder distraction of Aqua's cleansing would cover the noise. "How did they even get here?"

“Gee, Your Majesty,” Donald muttered back, shaking his head like it hurt. His voice was thick and pained, like he'd been coughing, or screaming, for hours. He spat on the ground, gagging a bit; he left a small puddle of dark goo on the ground. “Couldn’t be because a giant portal opening up with two minutes of warning was a bit *suspicious.”*

Mickey scowled; his temper was shorter, here, and Donald was great at making it worse. He took a breath so his voice would remain even before he responded.

“You know what I mean! Donald, this place is dangerous, even if-”

Even if they both clearly had magical training. Had Donald taught them at some point?

“They followed me in,” Donald told him quietly, losing his sarcastic expression for a more controlled one. Up close, the tears looked thick and black as pitch, and his feathers were stained and mottled. If he didn’t know better, he’d say Donald was still in danger of going dark himself (it was why he would *never* have summoned his friend here had he been given a choice; his temper was far too volatile). But the darkness was dripping off and evaporating as they stood there, and Donald didn’t *seem* to be struggling with it... “We have a magical connection, the portal probably couldn’t tell it wasn’t me until they were through.”

“And then flung them somewhere at random when the spell glitched out,” Mickey surmised slowly, thoughtfully. He didn’t know what to say about the magical connection; Donald wasn’t the kind to be poetic, so it was probably literal, but why…?

“Magical connection? Seriously? Can you finally explain some of this

stuff!?" Sora demanded, because he was suddenly *there,* and Mickey jumped. Donald froze.

Almost literally; Mickey actually *saw* the glow of a spell take hold, which…

Which looked an awful like the summoning spell underneath Disney castle. He… did not like that.

"Uh, well… see, Sora, the thing is…" Mickey hedged, eyeing Donald and hoping for some kind of help.

Donald didn't move. His eyes were apparently stuck on the horizon, and Mickey could see the spell rapidly spread from his face to his hands and neck.

He *really* didn't like that.

"Pal? Don, you alright?" he tried. There was no reaction at all.

"He keeps doing that whenever I ask him a question," Sora grumbled, crossing his arms. "You can tell me, I'm not going to freak out!"

Donald's skin was faintly glowing all over now, and his eyes were wide and unseeing.

"Is he okay?" Aqua asked, walking over, and now José was peering at Donald closely, eyes narrowing with concern.

“He has been doing that whenever Sora is nearby,” Panchito observed. “The spell did not activate when it was just us.”

Mickey really, *really* did not like what he was hearing.

“Don?”

“Wait, what spell?” Sora asked, and now Riku was squinting at Donald with a frown. His eyes slowly darted to Mickey, and his expression twisted uncertainly.

“Your Majesty, is that…?”

“I think we need to get to Master Yen Sid and try to remove it,” Mickey insisted, waving his hands. “Then we can go find Ventus, right, Aqua?”

“Right!” She nodded enthusiastically. Her eyes lingered on Donald briefly. “Let’s get that done; I want to hear all about José from you! He told me a lot of stories while we were… waiting.”

Mickey felt a cold chill run down his spine. The secrecy, the world order… it might have fallen apart without him even knowing.

Surely they could trust Aqua, though? She was a Keyblade Master, she would know that this was serious.

Then again, Sora and Riku both also knew that. They'd never broken their promises, as far as Mickey knew. Maybe it would be fine to tell them. If only so they could explain why Donald and Goofy were so quiet about their home lives.

Their return was quiet, but quick. Thankfully it was easy enough to open a portal straight to Master Yen Sid's Tower, where they gave Aqua to the care of the three good fairies to check over after her long stay in the Realm of Darkness. Riku went to talk to Kairi easily enough, which left Mickey trying to convince Sora to join them so he could talk to Donald properly.

"Sora, I know you're worried-"

"No, I'm- yes, I'm worried, but I also want to know what's going on! Who are these two guys, and why can't Donald just *say* something?!" Sora snapped, gesturing at Donald, who was wrapped between José and Panchito. The second they'd been out of the Realm, he'd just- clung to them. Desperately. Silently. Mickey couldn't judge; he did the same thing when he got home to Minnie.

There was always the chance that he would never return, after all.

Master Yen Sid was hunched over him, waving a hand at the darkness still staining his feathers and frowning when it had no effect. Merlin was standing by the side muttering feedback. They both seemed perturbed that he was still standing and talking calmly, instead of shrieking in rage and commanding Heartless or something.

Which *was* strange; in the bright light of Master Yen Sid's tower, the full extent of the staining was more evident, and Mickey couldn't understand how someone could be *physically* covered in that much

literal darkness and not be falling under its influence. But Donald mostly just seemed tired and strung out, which was pretty normal for him.

He also wouldn't let go of José's hands, but given where they'd found the poor guy, Mickey couldn't really judge. José wasn't covered in the darkness the same way Donald was, but he looked dimmer than usual and tired.

… wait, didn't they have an *egg* at home?! Who was watching it while they were all here?!

Goofy was sitting quietly in the back of the room, watching with an unusually somber expression. When he met Mickey's eyes he smiled cheerfully enough, but it didn't reach his eyes, and dropped when Mickey turned away.

Donald wasn't moving. His expression was distracted.

"Check his hands as well," José was saying, frowning at where their hands met.

"Do you think that's where this darkness is coming from?" Merlin asked curiously, tugging his beard.

"No, I think he is in need of healing. Donald, amor, what did you *do?"*

"This appears to be a mishandled Thundara spell," Master Yen Sid muttered, pulling Donald's hands forward to peer at the left palm, which were covered in strangely branching scars. "One would think you could at least handle *this,* Mage."

“Donal’ is more than capable of handling a small spell!” Panchito insisted, tugging Donald over to his side to look himself. “Why-”

“Sora, we can’t talk while you’re in the room,” Mickey said decisively, looking back at Sora, who was watching the conversation with a frown. “I promise, I’ll explain afterwards, but right now I have to check on Donald, okay?”

Sora was still staring. Donald’s eyes drifted up, almost absently, and met Sora’s gaze. Something in his expression seemed to convince him, because Sora sighed, nodded, and walked out of the room to the parlor with Riku and Kairi trailing afterwards.

The second the door was shut, Donald let out a long, weary sigh, and slumped down.

“I had to cast it into a wall opening about four inches in diameter and couldn’t let the people next to me see what I was doing,” he grumbled immediately, exhaustion making him blunt. “I know how to cast a *Thundara* spell correctly. And I have been taking Potions for it, but they’re slow to heal nerve damage.”

Mickey had no idea *why* he would need to do that, but based on how José and Panchito glanced at each other, they certainly did. Master Yen Sid huffed and didn’t respond; he waved a hand over Donald’s with a flicker of green light, and the scars faded away.

Donald clenched his hands into fists briefly, then relaxed. He muttered a thanks.

“The whole darkness thing will fade on its own,” he added, rolling his

eyes and shoulders as he sat up. “Just needs to work itself out.”

“You seem confident in something you couldn’t have experienced before,” Master Yen Sid observed; his tone made Mickey wince. He’d trained under the man, and he was more than familiar with his varying judgemental tones. This one would have had Mickey scrambling for his books to look up sources to be absolutely sure of his claims.

Donald, though, raised a brow.

“ *You* seem rather confident,” he replied caustically, “that I couldn’t have any idea what I’m talking about. Between the two of us, which one was there?”

“You are a lackluster Mage at best, and cannot even generate your own magic,” Master Yen Sid returned, voice grim and deep. “I would sooner trust a child’s opinion on the inner workings of a Gummi ship than your conclusions regarding magic or darkness.”

Mickey blinked at that, startled. He’d never heard Master Yen Sid sound so… harsh.

Panchito bristled, while José started to sit up with a scowl of his own. Donald tugged them both back, shrugging.

“Guess you won’t be getting answers, then,” he answered cheerfully, before wincing and rubbing at his chest. José turned to eye him, then leaned in and whispered in his ear, too low for Mickey to catch. Whatever it was, Donald shook his head.

“Now, can we *please* do something about this damned World Order spell before I suffocate?” He demanded, looking over at Mickey. Goofy let out an agreeing sound.

“I know why we’ve got it an’ all, Mick, but it got dangerous for Donald when it happened!” He told them. “Couldn’t barely move! Had to focus on not even thinkin’ about what was happening to keep it from happening to me too.”

“What…?”

“It keeps us from spilling about the portal or our world, but it is *really* specific. I kept thinking ‘oh, if I can nod I could answer yes or no questions!’, and then my neck would be frozen,” Donald explained, more to the two on the couch than Mickey or the others. “That spell is a pain in the tailfeathers.”

“Why does it need to be so strict?” José asked, leaning forward to peer at Mickey with a frown. “Surely you must trust your allies?”

“What *spell?!”* Mickey finally demanded. “I don’t- you mean you two were *magically* keeping things secret?!”

Donald and Goofy nodded in unison.

“Yes?”

“Ayup!”

Mickey stared back. Every conversation they'd ever had running through his head, trying to process. *Magically* ordered? How? How had he never *noticed?*

Master Yen Sid frowned at him.

“Surely you were aware of the ramifications of your orders as King,” he stated, bushy eyebrows drawing together. “The allies summoned to the castle are to be loyal to you above all else.”

“I thought that meant the spell *chose* people that I could trust! Not that they were being *magically forced to obey me!”* Mickey shrieked, tugging at his ears. “You guys are my friends, why didn’t you *say* something?!”

“Can’t say anything here, if someone is in the room,” Donald said clearly, simply. Like it didn’t even *bother* him. “And when we’re home, the last thing on my mind is asking about your orders. I'm usually trying to remember if I went grocery shopping before I got summoned.”

“I’m just glad Maxxy understands my memory bein’ a little fuzzy sometimes,” Goofy said with a laugh. “Haven’t missed anything’ important since he got me that calendar though!”

“Hey, is his graduation party scheduled yet?” Donald asked, glancing over. “I want to try and make it, but I need plenty of warning.”

“Amor, when do you even *sleep-”*

“Master, I need to break that spell,” Mickey interrupted, heart

pounding. “I can’t- I’m not going to keep them under my command like that!”

“I’m afraid that to remove the spell would likely remove your ability to summon them as well,” Master Yen Sid replied calmly. “They are intrinsically tied together as a single enchantment, to avoid one failing while the other holds.”

Which-

Mickey looked between them. They’d sacrificed a lot. They all had, Mickey wasn’t going to pretend any of their roads had been easy to walk. But he couldn’t give up on this place. He would return whenever he needed to, to try and fix things for good.

But he’d had a choice. Could his friends even say the same?

Should he free them from this obligation-

“Just say we no longer have to follow those orders, and watch your wording from now on,” Donald huffed. “There, problem solved. And then I need to tell Sora *something,* the kid deserves the truth. Even if we only tell part of the story, they all deserve that.”

Goofy nodded.

“We can stick to certain parts if you think we should, Mick,” he offered with a smile. “But I trust him!”

Mickey paused, then nodded. They were right. Sure, in the beginning it had made sense to be cautious. But Sora had more than earned their trust. All of them had.

"Just- leave the summoning spells and whatnot out, yeah?" He asked, forcing it to be a question, not a command, and when they nodded, he sighed. Focused.

"You two are free of any previous commands issued after your first Summons," he said carefully. "Any and all orders made between your Oaths and this moment are null and void."

"Your Majesty-" Master Yen Sid started, but Mickey saw the spell unravel before he could finish his sentence. Donald let out a relieved sigh; Goofy smiled brightly.

"I'm not keeping them hostage," Mickey insisted. "I trust them, and I trust the others. We need to *trust* each other, not be held under orders and spells. That's my last word on that."

Master Yen Sid eyed him for a long moment, before nodding.

"As you say, Your Majesty."

"Now then! If I may, *I* would like to hear more about what Master Donald has to say about this whole darkness thing. I must say, it does appear that it has faded considerably since we started this conversation!" Merlin interjected, and all eyes looked back at Donald. Who *did* look considerably less… ink splattered would be the best word.

He glanced down at himself as well, rubbing at a splotch on his shirt and watching it dissolve into a wispy dust that dispersed into the air. He repeated the action with a few more spots, before glancing back up.

"I think I was acting like a filter," he admitted, shaking his head again; some faint grey mist rose from his hat. "Dark infested magic in, clean magic out. The darkness had to go *somewhere."*

"Darkness is hardly an infestation in the Realm *of* Darkness," Master Yen Sid asserted, sitting behind his desk. "That is a child's understanding of light and dark. Both are necessary-"

"Yeah, yeah, balance, light needs darkness and darkness needs light," Donald interrupted with a wave of his hand; Mickey was starting to see why Master Yen Sid didn't seem to like him. Though what had he meant by lackluster mage…? "But *water* is neither light *nor* dark. The sea in the Realm of Darkness is infested with it when the two should be separate entities."

"The sea can get rather dark, from what I know of how light travels through water," Master Yen Sid observed.

"I don't mean *literally-"*

"Oh, I think I see!" Merlin interjected with excitement. "You mean you could feel the magical core *of* the seas?"

Master Yen Sid seemed even more troubled by that idea, frowning. Mickey had no idea what they were talking about.

“That’s- yeah, that’s it,” Donald agreed after a moment, tapping his beak. “We’d call it elemental magic back home, but same difference. The darkness that I was feeling, it… it’s different. Not something that belongs in the same place as the water.”

“What do you mean?” Mickey asked; Master Yen Sid’s face twisted further, but surely he should at least want to hear this? Nobody else had done whatever Donald had done, as far as Mickey knew-

“José, did you feel anything? You were riding the air for a while,” Donald asked; José frowned.

“The air did not feel… correct,” he said slowly. “But I was rather… I was not in my right mind, so I would hesitate to say more.”

Donald nodded, then glanced back at Mickey.

“See, there’s darkness that’s just- a shadow, or the darkness of the night,” he said carefully, like he was feeling his way around a concept he hadn’t quite put into words before. “ *That’s* natural, part of the balance and whatever. And then there’s the *absence* of light. Not because it's blocked by something, but because it doesn’t exist. Like out in space. That’s not really *dark* in the same way, it's a lack instead of a difference.”

“That… sorry, pal, I don’t understand,” Mickey admitted, taking a seat. “There’s different kinds of darkness?”

“It is more metaphysical, more than literal,” José said, gesturing vaguely with one hand. “Shadow magic does not work at night because the night is not a shadow, but a separate phase of the day. It is defined by perception, you see? Living things do not think of the night as merely the shadow of the earth, or a shadow as a miniature

night, and so they are distinct."

"Like the sun is a ball of flame, but you wouldn't call a campfire a small sun!" Panchito added cheerfully.

"And space is… neither of those things," Mickey tried. It made no sense when he tried to define it, but it did make sense to him in some instinctive way.

"Space is dark because there *is* no light, not that the existing light was blocked. It's *space,* the huge, yawning emptiness between planets and stars. The gravitational currents around the tidepools of nebulas and galaxies," Donald said absently, like the words weren't even his, but something he was quoting or recalling. He blinked, then continued. "Anyway, the Realm of Darkness feels more like space than literal darkness. It felt like *nothing,* something that shouldn't Be because it Isn't."

The words felt ominous and echoing in a way Mickey couldn't quite fathom, and Master Yen Sid turned to properly face Donald for the first time in their discussion.

"You posit that the Realm of Darkness is merely dark because it lacks the things necessary to be anything *else,* " he posed, and Donald nodded.

"I think worlds lost to Heartless go there, and nobody remembers *being* there after, because they don't exist. It's a realm that doesn't exist and everything *else* that doesn't exist is there with it," he stated. "That's why if doesn't feel right when you're there; its not an eternal night, it's forcing the nothing to be a physical place you can *be.* That's why the water felt weird; I could touch the water *itself,* but I can't use the Nothing. Or, well, I won't; it sounds like a terrible idea. But since the two things aren't compatible, the sea's magic flowed through me

and left the darkness behind. And now it's filtering out on its own."

"One might wonder what that is doing to *you,"* Master Yen Sid pointed out. "Acting as a human- well. Living filter."

Donald shook his head again, and more dust- darkness, probably - flittered away.

"Guess we'll have to wait and see," he said. "But in the meantime, we have another Keyblade Master to find, don't we?"

Lights in the Dark

This place felt weird.

It had been unpleasant before; dark, cold, a strange sense of wrongness permeating every rock and breath. Energy and life being sapped out of you with every movement.

Now, though, it felt like it was trying to be something *else,* like the Nothing was fighting to be Something, and the resulting chaos left the place feeling at war with itself. Donald assumed it would resolve itself soon enough, likely fading back to Darkness, maybe a few Worlds regaining a few square feet of territory, but for now it felt eerie, like every step was in a different place entirely. Darkness. Light. Dark. Light.

He focused on that. Instead of the conversation behind him.

“So, Donald has three nephews.”

“Sure does! And a few nieces, and an egg on the way!”

“He’s dating those two guys back in the Tower.”

“Those’re Panchito and José! They’ve been together for years!”

“And you’ve got a son.”

“Ayup! Maxxy! He’s my baby boy!”

“Um, wait, how old is he?”

“He’s a bit older than you now! Want to see some pictures?”

“Uh… maybe later. When we aren’t in the Realm of Darkness looking for a castle,” Sora hedged, looking around them. Donald stifled a laugh, managing to make it sound more like a cough. Sora didn’t look at him.

Sora had in fact been ignoring him since they’d left Yen Sid’s tower. Donald wasn’t sure if he was still mad about the secrets or something else; he seemed to have forgiven Goofy right away.

Sora had always preferred Goofy, though. Goofy was more likeable; more cheerful, less temperamental. Clearly *he* wasn’t being malicious by not revealing secrets. Donald, though… Well. He had a lot more secrets than just these ones. Maybe it was easier to stomach from Goofy.

It had been Goofy that convinced Panchito and José to stay behind while they found Ventus, even, pointing out that José should get some medical care from being trapped for so long, and Donald would be with friends while they were gone.

He’d whispered something else, too. Something that made Panchito’s eyes go slightly narrower in thought. Which would probably be an issue for later, but for now it meant they were *safe,* and Donald could focus on this mission. Just this one, and then he could get back to them and hopefully get more than five seconds to breathe and recover.

They were *here,* in the place Donald's nightmares lived, surrounded on all sides by a literal darkness that infected everyone it came across. Their egg was safe, at least, he couldn't imagine what he would do if it was here with them, but he hadn't seen it since Costa Rica. He desperately wanted to see their egg, feel the warmth of the shell and be reminded that there were things waiting back home besides the Phantom Blot and his other nightmare come true.

But if he let himself ponder for even a millisecond the idea of any of his kids being *here* he was going to just start screaming and never stop.

"So how did you and José meet? Oh, and Panchito!" Aqua asked, slipping closer to him as they walked. Apparently she and José had bonded pretty substantially.

Donald liked that they hadn't been alone. That of all the things that could be found here, those two had found each other.

"School. Or, well, *at* a school, but we weren't classmates then. We actually were all gifted part of a cabana on campus as part of my great grandfather's will," Donald explained carefully, keeping his eyes out around them. He could feel the darkness pressing in, like it also wanted him to absorb it. He hoped he hadn't released it or something when he'd gone to the Tower; surely one of the varying Masters would have noticed if it was doing something besides vanishing into the air?

"Oh?"

"Yeah, we- our ancestors were a adventuring trio, and my great grandfather, that's grandpa Coot, he was a bit obsessed with their history. I guess when he saw there were three descendants, all around the same age, he thought it would be a way to pass along that legacy."

“That’s really interesting!” Aqua said brightly. “I don’t know much about my ancestors, I wonder if there’s anything like that in my history?”

“Maybe,” Donald replied, trying to find a smile to match hers; he didn’t think he succeeded. “I think it’s worth looking, even if you don’t find anything big; knowing your grandmother was a dancer, or had an award winning pie recipe, that’s also fun to know, right?”

“Of course!” She agreed, smiling. “So… does your grandmother have an award winning pie recipe?”

Donald was genuinely surprised she knew what a pie *was.*

“First place at the county fair for eight years running,” he told her smugly. “I helped her make it one year, right before I moved out. I was the only one she allowed in her kitchen. José’s the real chef though, he can make anything taste good.”

Aqua giggled, and they continued on.

Sora was still ignoring him.

It was fine, Donald forced himself to think. Sora had Goofy. They didn’t really need him.

Castle Oblivion. Again. Donald had hoped they’d seen the last of this

particular castle. That they were done with Organization XIII in general, really, but in particular this blasted castle. Hard to feel like they were making even the slightest dent in the darkness problem here when they were just fighting the same people in the same places over and over again. Only now that Aqua was with them, *she* apparently could change it back.

Because there *was* a back to change it to. The place wasn't always a collection of white rooms that made no spatial sense. It had once been a place of learning for Keyblade wielders. A place to train to fight the dark. The Land of Departure.

Donald wanted to be interested. He should care about the history here, the magic it took to unravel an entire place and hide it inverted inside another thing entirely. Hide it so well that an entire team of people devoted to finding the person Aqua had hidden away *still* couldn't find him, even standing on the same ground.

But all he wanted to do was wake the kid up and get out of here before something awful happened.

(to get back to José and Panchito and the comfort they offered, even if he still needed to lecture them about their incredibly dangerous decisions, because really-!)

But here they were, and-

"Why does he look just like Roxas?" Donald had to ask the room at large. Cause that was more than a resemblance, they could be *twins*. "Or, I guess why does Roxas look just like *him?"*

"Mumbo jumbo, magic something something, hearts aligned, magic spells something," Sora muttered back. A pause, then they were both

muffling laughter into their hands while Aqua walked up to wake Ventus. Then Sora's mouth twisted, and he turned away.

Well. It wasn't like Donald expected things to just get better, did he?

He should probably feel bad for laughing, though; Ventus wasn't waking up. He wasn't even reacting to Aqua's voice, her hand on his shoulder. Just continued sitting there, sleeping. Peaceful, like nothing here ever was.

He… knew that pain a bit too well. Of looking at someone who may never wake up. Aqua seemed disappointed but not terribly surprised, like she'd never really expected him to wake that easily.

Or at all.

Donald didn't have the full scope of what had happened to him, but it sounded like the damage had been severe. Life threatening. Enough that Ventus' heart had straight up left his body to seek somewhere safer to heal up.

That place being *Sora's* heart, and how many people did he even have in there? Roxas, Ventus, Kairi for a while, and apparently someone *else* that nobody knew the name of yet. Kid needed to start charging rent.

Could they sense each other when they were all there at once? Would Ventus remember anything? Kairi hadn't said anything of the sort though…

Aqua began to murmur about how to let Ventus out and back into his

own body, or at least check on his health to see if he would *survive* it, and Sora looked sick. Donald shuffled closer, hoping he could offer some comfort at least, but Sora moved away. Not much, he wasn't running for the hills or anything, but enough for Donald to get the message.

He stayed where he was.

Goofy moved closer, and Sora turned to him instead. Good. Donald was glad he was comfortable talking to someone, at least.

Then they got attacked by Vanitas *,* a person that existed and, apparently, looked just like *Sora,* so Donald felt vindicated in his earlier question. And still wondered if he had angered a god. Surely Storkules would have told him if he had a curse on him, right?

As usual, the second a huge battle started he and Goofy found themselves trapped outside of it, watching. Helpless. Sora was with them for once, though, that was a change.

And a *bad* one . Aqua was nowhere near full strength and it was obvious she was struggling. Her desperation was palpable, eyes wide and arms clearly shaking. She'd only been out of this realm for a few *hours,* and here they were again, drowning in darkness and far from any allies they could call for help.

Donald banged on the barrier keeping them apart. He knew it would do no good. It *never* did any good, and at best was a distraction, but he couldn't find the threads of the spell holding the barriers together to pull apart; it was just a wall of pure magic that couldn't be unraveled until the person who had created it was too exhausted or dead to keep it up.

Sora was pacing, muttering, trying to press into the barrier as well and something about his eyes was *wrong* but Donald couldn't address it right now, he just had to find a way in and they could help Aqua (it had never worked before but maybe it would this time! Just this one time?)

(please?)

He could maybe *overpower* the barrier, magic versus pure magic, but he had no idea what that might do! If he blasted a hole in it, would it rebound back at them? Go straight through and potentially hit one of the people inside?

He'd never had the guts. Couldn't risk potentially hitting Sora (and it was always Sora). So. Bashed on the barrier and hoped Vanitas might just look up and let Aqua get a good hit in, he couldn't even *heal* through these damned things-

And then it was two against one. Ventus, eyes open and determined, had joined the battle. Apparently he was going to recover after all. Sora was gasping for air like he'd run a marathon, hand clutched to his chest, but he shied away when Donald darted back, worried-

"I think I remember the Power of Waking," he huffed, staring at the battle. He stood straighter. He seemed more confident. His eyes were clear.

Sora had always been… uncomfortable with how he seemed to constantly forget his skills or lose progress in magic and combat. It was hardly his *fault,* the situation wasn't from a lack of practice or effort, but it still grated on him that while the rest of their team was improving and getting stronger, Sora was forced to start from scratch over and over and over again.

It was nice to see the opposite happening; him getting a skill *back* instead. That trial he and Riku had been on had been a joke anyway, it was hardly fair that it had set him back all over again when he'd been *kidnapped* in the middle of it. Doubly so that they'd determined he'd failed in the first place, honestly; the entire thing had been hijacked before it ever began. But it was like there was something bigger that wanted to force him to repeat his training and never get anywhere with it, and this latest was no different.

Well. Maybe not anything *bigger.* Just Organization XIII. But the fact that they'd succeeded so many times felt like they were receiving help from *somewhere.*

Ventus and Aqua were more than a match for Vanitas, who vanished the second the tides turned, leaving the two friends to tearfully reunite.

One thing going right, at least. They'd found him, he was conscious and not suffering from amnesia, something that had been a possibility. It was a much more cheerful group that portalled back to Yen Sid's Tower.

It was easy enough to slip away when they returned. Ventus and Aqua needed a thorough once-over, which they accepted with matching grimaces and an agreement to sit together for the duration. Sora, Riku and Kairi had their own catching up to do about their training, since that had soundly been interrupted. Axel lingered for a moment, before muttering about a walk and vanishing through the doors. Yen Sid and Merlin were discussing next plans with Mickey; how they would take down Xehanort once and for all now that they had most of their allies gathered…

So Donald didn't so much 'sneak' as 'walk openly out of the room,'

José and Panchito in tow, with Goofy waving briefly as they walked out.

Gods bless Goofy, really.

They walked out of the room. Then the Tower. And before Donald could really think about it too much he was dragging them both onto the train and leaving the area entirely; it only took a minute to get back anyway, and Twilight Town would, with any luck, give them some space away from eavesdroppers.

He had no idea if he was worried about the kids or Yen Sid, really; the man's attitude was grating, but Donald doubted he would do anything besides be smug if he did hear anything.

Maybe he was just tired and hoping for five seconds to himself before the next crisis. They knew Xehanort needed 'seven lights' to oppose his 'thirteen darknesses.' So long as they were planning on following that whole thing, he wouldn't do anything against them, right? What would be the point?

Aqua, and now Ventus, plus Riku, Kairi, the King. Axel. And Sora, of course. Seven hearts full of light, to face thirteen people with the opposite. Gods knew who those would be; Xehanort, certainly. The missing Organization XIII members, perhaps? But that only netted him two, maybe three people.

He rubbed at one of the black spots on his feathers. They felt numb when he touched them, like patches of nothing on his skin, but they rubbed away easily enough and feeling returned. So no short term consequences of using the black, dark water of the Dark Meridian, just the question of if long term ones would appear down the line.

The two sidled up next to him on the train seat. Donald dragged them both closer, as much of a hug as he could manage from the side, and shuddered. He felt… drained, barely able to even process what was happening. They were here. They were *here,* and they were in so much danger he could hardly think. He could barely stop shaking.

"Are you okay?" he asked José quietly. There was nobody else on the train, but he couldn't shake the feeling they were being watched. "I wanted to ask earlier, but I figured you'd want privacy."

And maybe some space from Donald. He knew not to worry too much about people overcome with Darkness, but it hadn't escaped his attention that José had been heavily focused on Donald in his rage. It *was* his fault they were all here, after all.

"It was… strange. I felt very out of control, not in anger but in despair," he murmured back. "It was a struggle to recall what things made me happy. I could recall caring about something, but not why, and my mind would focus on the negatives instead."

Panchito slid an arm around and gripped José's hand. Donald leaned against him, arms fully trapped between the pair. José hummed.

"I do still feel a bit down," he admitted, "but I believe it will pass. Some good company, I think, will do the trick!"

Panchito chuckled. Donald couldn't quite muster the energy, but he did smile.

The train arrived at the station. It was bustling as it usually was, but their train was of course magical and not visible to most, so they were able to slip out without issue.

Panchito took his hand immediately. José linked their elbows. Donald sighed, long and low and comforted, and led the way into town. A bit aimless, he'd admit, but when they ended up at the fake Scrooge's restaurant, he figured that would do. At least they could get something to eat.

"Ah, is that…?" Panchito asked slowly, squinting as the other duck flitted around his restaurant. Donald shook his head.

"He's local, name is Dagobert. They're… stupidly similar though, even says I remind him of his nephew sometimes," Donald muttered back, keeping his voice low enough to avoid anyone else hearing them. The spell might have been removed, but he wasn't going to do anything stupid with the freedom. "There's also a set of triplets running around, and a Lady that looks like Daisy, if we end up back at Disney castle at any point."

"Really?" José asked curiously. Too curiously; clearly trying to keep the subject *off* the heavy topics they needed to talk about.

"Yeah; they run a shop in town. Cute kids," Donald said after a moment, forcing himself to sit upright and squint at a menu. "Tick, Trick and Track. The Lady is named Katrien."

"And no other clones? We don't have to watch for any extra Donalds somewhere?" Panchito giggled into his shoulder. He hadn't actually moved away from Donald for a moment, clinging to his arm since they got off the train. Donald snorted, feeling just a bit relaxed, and gripped José's hand over the table.

"None that I've met!" He chuckled. "Wouldn't mind a copy somewhere, he could take some of my jobs for once!"

“That would be nice, since I am fairly certain you haven’t been sleeping,” José observed, poking at Donald’s probably-horrific eye bags. If he never looked in a mirror to check, he never had to know, right?

“They’ve got Potions and things here that- well, they’re a substitute, sometimes. I sleep when I can, but…”

But if he went to sleep and someone attacked, he might be too slow to react.

“Tell us what is keeping you awake this time?” Panchito asked, tilting his head up. “We just want to understand what is happening!”

“You want to avoid me yelling at you for jumping through a magic portal,” Donald corrected. Panchito shrugged, unrepentant.

“It can be both!”

“We would also like to discuss why you are here, though from what Panchito told me while you were… gone, it does not sound like you were terribly willing?” José added softly. Donald sighed, the sound shuddering and shaking as it left his lungs.

“It’s not that I wouldn’t have helped,” he whispered. “But no, I really don’t want to be here. If it wasn’t for the kids, honestly, I’d…”

Nothing. He would have come either way. But he would feel less conflicted when he left.

“The first time it happened, it was right after the lava lizards incident at Easter Island…”

He carefully told the story, wary of anyone sitting near them (though they were far more interested in the chef, who was of course a rat). The Summons, the speech and orders from the King, presented by the current reigning Queen Minnie. Training, going to find Sora, the Heartless and Nobodies and Organization XIII and the Princesses of Heart-

It was a long story, even if he tried to boil it down. It was also a confusing story; José started taking notes.

“Wait, this was Ansem?”

“No, it was Xehanort, his apprentice, pretending to *be* Ansem. Called himself the Seeker of Darkness, doesn’t wear a shirt…”

“This is the same as the Master Xehanort Aqua spoke of?”

“Yeah, but apparently he’s possessed their friend Terra so he looks different now-”

“Why are all of your enemies the same person?!”

“Budget cuts.”

And so on. They were less curious about the worlds at large and the magical war than they were about the dangers *in* it, and the 'lackluster' comment they'd heard earlier.

"Donald, how important is this Master Yen Sid?" Panchito asked. His smile was dangerous.

" *Important.* It's fine, Pancho, I don't care about his opinions."

"Well *we* care about you having to listen to him," José said simply.

Food had arrived at some point. Donald wasn't paying attention to what it was, but his partners seemed to be enjoying it at least. Remy was a talented chef.

"I've heard worse," Donald retorted eventually. "I have bigger priorities than a jerk. Besides, he doesn't know about… he doesn't have the full picture."

"You mean the Blot," José said carefully. "We never… spoke about that."

"There's nothing to really say. You know I fought him. He really only had the one weapon. I wasn't a mage back then, so the damage was done but I got to avoid the shock," Donald said breezily, because if he paused for any length of time on this topic he was going to- he didn't even know. Cry? Scream? Blow something up? Probably that last one.

"And now?"

“It hurts, if I do anything stupid.”

“Like what?”

Like trying to use magic the ‘wrong’ way again.

“Any kind of magical damage, I guess,” Donald said. “The volcano thing did some damage, you knew that already, and I think it might have opened those old scars back up.”

“Considering you never got those healed the first time, perhaps we can do something about that this time around,” José offered. For some reason, it made Donald bristle.

“I’m *fine.* I don’t need-”

You want to take care of everything yourself!

He shuddered. Sighed. He was doing that a lot.

“I don’t need to be coddled. The damage was minimal, it’s just been a tough few… It's been rough. I’ll be fine.”

José and Panchito glanced at each other. Given how close they were all sitting, it wasn’t subtle. Donald let his head droop to the table.

He was so *tired.*

“Is there anyone we can at least ask? To make sure the volcano did not cause any additional damages we should be worrying about?” José asked. Hesitant. Gentle. Donald found, ridiculously, that he missed the screaming rage from the Realm of Darkness. It felt more honest. Less patronizing.

“What, a magical healing expert? Sure, yeah, they’re all over the place. Mind you, we’re in the middle of a war, so we probably don’t have any kind of *time* for that!” He snapped, biting his tongue nearly in two when a few people turned to look at them. “I just need to get through this battle, and then-”

“And then, I imagine you plan to go back *home,* where we have far fewer people to ask and where there is even *less* time to address it before the next thing happens,” José retorted.

Panchito was wilting into Donald’s shoulder. He wasn’t disagreeing.

“We just want to help,” he whispered instead. “Do you not trust that we can help you?”

You don’t trust us at all!

“Of course I trust you,” he insisted, lacking the energy to emphasize it. “The situation is just… messy.”

“We just want to make it less messy!” Panchito told him.

He knew that. He *did.* But gods above why did it have to be *here?*

“I just want to finish this and leave,” he grumbled. “We can find a healer at home, I promise, but-”

How does it feel knowing you’ve nearly doomed us all?!

He knew better than to worry about what someone drowning in darkness said. The words were chosen to hurt.

That didn’t mean they weren’t true, though.

“This place is dangerous. More than anything we’ve done before. The last thing I ever wanted was for you both to be in this kind of danger,” he told the table in a scratchy whisper. “And I know, I know, we’re always together, but- please just- this isn’t about trust, I’m just-”

Terrified. Completely and utterly *petrified* . That something would go wrong here, that he might never go home and nobody would ever know because *Kingdom Hearts had to remain a secret.*

And now they were all here. Their egg was back home. His kids were back home, everyone he knew was *there* and he was *here* and utterly helpless.

“Donald. We are not incompetent. We are here for *you.* If we are not the best fit for the *fighting,* we will stay back,” José said seriously. Simply. Like there was no question of the truth in his words. “If you will be more afraid for us than yourself, we will not fight these… creatures. We trust your judgement, you see? But we want to help you in whatever way *will* be helpful.”

“We just want you to talk to us. Please, Donal’?” Panchito asked. Begged. “We are worried about you. Please do not ask us to pretend we are not.”

José nodded. They were both all but leaning on top of him, their weight grounding against the weightlessness he usually felt here. Something to tether him to reality.

He rubbed at another numb spot, feeling returning slowly as he did. He hated this, hated feeling like if he talked about it, it became *real.* Became something to worry about, for others to worry about. Like he couldn’t afford to burden them more than they were; they were both in so much danger, because of *him,* what right did he have to add more?

But he’d promised Panchito. He knew that keeping things to himself was only causing harm. It just *hurt,* to have to say it. To put words to his worries and injuries, make them real by acknowledging them. Like he was slicing himself open to drain an infection; it needed to happen, but he would admit that it still hurt.

He sighed.

“Okay.” Donald breathed, and he felt their relief sag onto his shoulders. “Okay.”

Sunset Hill

The first thing to do, José declared, was to find a Healer. He wouldn't stand for Donald to remain potentially injured any longer, especially if they *were* going to fight Xehanort soon. Donald let him take control. He honestly just wanted to *breathe* and enjoy their presence without thinking about it too hard, and was happy to not be in charge for the moment.

And, if he was willing to be completely honest with himself, he should see a Healer. Should have considered it *years* ago, when he started coming here at least, since there were so many more magic users here than in their dimension (not that it was a mystery why *that* was…). But it had been hard, so hard, to go to someone to ask for help like that. Help that he didn't know that he could trust, when he'd first arrived, and then it had become a habit to avoid anyone getting a look at him when it wasn't necessary. Help he didn't *need*, he was functioning after all. Help that would only benefit him, not the mission, not the overall goal. Just him.

Having someone *else* force the issue meant he could just nod and agree. And promise he wouldn't let it happen again; Panchito made him look into his eyes and swear he would ask for help next time, no matter what.

But before all of that, they both needed some proper clothing. And protections. And Donald a new staff since he'd actually lost his in the Realm of Darkness and couldn't afford to be without one. They both tried, briefly, to argue with him on the cost, but he was able to silence *that* by dropping a pile of munny on the counter at the first shop and grumbling it was too heavy to carry around anyway. Munny was easy to find here anyway.

Disturbingly easy.

The pair being dressed in Kingdom Hearts duds was sure… something. Relieving for one, because as different as the fashion was here, the clothing was better suited to protecting the wearer from the darkness and magical damage.

But apparently, Donald was realizing, he *liked* the aesthetic of the clothing here. Especially on the other two. He hadn't had the chance to appreciate Panchito's temporarily enchanted stuff earlier, but *now*…

His cheeks burned a bit at the realization.

Panchito noticed. Of course he did.

"See something you like, Donal'?" He teased, winking and doing a spin to show off his shirt and tugging on the lapels. They had zippers on them, of course. And some nice new holsters for his pistols. But. *Zippers.* Everywhere. On his spats, on his sombrero-

Donald let out a garbled noise of agreement. José was laughing at him, tugging at the belts around his waist with amusement. His new hat also had zippers on it.

"Well, certainly an interesting costume change! I like that we match!" He said cheerfully, twirling his umbrella. Donald would probably have to enchant their weapons later for them to actually do anything, just in case- but for now, they were at least protected enough that he wasn't in a panic. The fact that they blended in better was good, too; the last thing they needed was for someone to spot them and start asking questions.

"True! Donald! We must take a picture!"

“Wait wait wait- how are we going to *explain* this if anyone sees it-”

“We are in costume of course!”

The shopkeeper was laughing at them. Donald was giggling despite himself, and made faces at the camera while Panchito, being the tallest, carefully held it out.

“I could take a picture, if you’d like?” The shopkeep asked after a few moments’ struggle with the angle, holding out a hand. “You just press that circle on the screen, right? My grandson just got one of these, very new-fangled thing isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Donald laughed. “My nephews are pros already though!”

Being behind on technology your kids had mastered already was just one of those universal things; she laughed and took their photo, with the tram visible behind them. It was just innocuous enough that he thought they could get away with it. So long as the costume excuse worked.

Then, back to José’s goals. He refused to let Donald push things off, period, and wanted them to find someone *today,* if possible, while Ventus and Aqua were still healing themselves. The issue was *who.* Donald point blank refused to speak to Yen Sid about it, which left them with few other options.

They had Evan with some medical knowledge, technically, but that wasn’t really the same thing. And his focus was more experimental than medicinal.

There was Aerith, maybe, but they were so busy in Radiant Gardens he did hate to bother them, and he'd have to take the Gummi ship to their world, which might take them too far to be acceptable. Sure, most of the Keyblade wielders could teleport now, they wouldn't be stranded, but *Goofy* couldn't, and anyway the idea of not being there for the fight was…

Unacceptable. Donald might be the least useful member of the team, but a member he was, and he wouldn't leave them all to face the darkness alone.

"What about the fairies at the Tower? They aren't Yen Sid," Panchito pointed out. Donald let out an uncertain grumble; they'd retreated to Sunset Hill, thankfully empty of any of the town's residents, and Donald had taken the opportunity to flop into Panchito's lap.

Look, he gave the best head scritches and Donald hadn't actually seen him in *months.* Dignity be damned, he was cuddling up to his partner for some affection. José was sprawled against his legs, gesturing vaguely as they talked.

"They work for him, and- I don't know, I hate the idea of him knowing. I hear enough about my 'lackluster skills' already. I don't think it'll get any better if he knows it's permanent."

"He does seem rather stuck on that," José agreed. Donald shrugged, best he could.

"He's a stickler for rules and obligations, and in his opinion me being… injured makes me a failure at my mage obligations. Never mind I didn't really have a choice in the *first* place…"

They both huffed at that. Donald smiled; it was nice to hear someone

agree with him, at least. Goofy was too nice about it to really vent to, and he didn't even try with Mickey. Yen Sid was his *hero,* the person that had made this world make sense and trained him to handle the threats he would face here. Donald didn't want to get involved with that.

They sat in silence for a long few minutes before Donald sighed, rubbing his chest absently.

"Merlin would be fine, if he's willing," he offered to the air at large. "I think he'd at least be able to see if there is any damage."

He had no idea, really, but they both perked up at the suggestion at least.

"Do you want us to stay in the Tower while you are off fighting great evils? We could visit this town and explore, it seems nice! And mostly safe!" Panchito offered after a few minutes.

"Perhaps in a hotel instead of the Tower," José corrected with a flicked hand. "I did not see anywhere to sleep there."

"Honestly, nowhere here is *safe,* so it isn't going to make much of a difference . Radiant Gardens, maybe, that's where Merlin lives…" Donald mused, before he sighed. "Are you two really okay with not being in the thick of things?"

They both went quiet for a long time. He could tell they were glancing at each other over his head. He wondered what they'd spoken about while he was helping find Ventus.

“We do not like you being without us,” José said. “I am sure your friends fight well, but… you do tend to struggle in a battle where you are more focused on defending someone else instead of yourself.”

“But we’re worried you will be more focused on *us* than yourself, if we do join you,” Panchito added, fingers never ceasing their track through Donald’s feathers. They were getting long again.

Donald grimaced. They weren’t wrong. Either of them. He really didn’t like fighting with people he wanted to protect; he spent the entire fight in sheer terror that if he couldn’t see them at all times, they were overwhelmed, in danger. Dead.

Sora was loud, at least. Donald didn’t have much trouble finding him on the battlefield.

But it had never been like that with the Cabs. If he expressed concern about a fight, they just *listened.* If he said they should go another route, if he suggested some other way, they paid attention. They didn’t always do what he said, but they were willing to hear out his concerns and discuss them. Compromise. He usually felt *confident* with them in a fight, honestly. Like someone had his back, he was safe, he could focus on the enemy and not his allies.

Here really wasn’t any different. Maybe it was just that the Heartless weren’t a threat they’d faced together, they were a threat Donald had faced *first,* and now had to watch them get involved with? He hadn’t felt like this in the Realm of Darkness, sheer panic at the idea of José being overcome with Darkness had driven fear of the Heartless out of his mind entirely. But now thinking of a simple brawl in the town square was making him shake.

It was unreasonable. He knew that.

He clenched his injured hand. It still tingled, though the pain was largely gone. He hoped the numbness would wear off now that the damage had been healed; they didn't really have permanent injuries here, with Healing and Potions, so he had no idea if there would be long term issues or not. Yen Sid would probably have said something, right? If only to brag…

Regardless.

"I think it would be better if you were armed for the area," he said slowly, because that at least he could focus on. "The things here are… hard to kill, if you're not armed correctly. And contagious, to boot, so you really don't want to get too close. Hell, the spells I can use are barely more effective than just punching them, the Keyblade is the best option by a longshot."

"I'm guessing we can't just get one of them?" José asked with some humor, twisting to look at him. Donald chuckled.

"Nah, it's a whole chosen one thing. Sort of. Believe me, if I could take one and keep at least one of the kids out of it, I would. They shouldn't have to do this."

"At least they get to travel around with you!"

Donald laughed. It wasn't bitter, just sad.

"Pretty sure that isn't any kind of prize, Chito," he chuckled, rolling his eyes. "I'm the boring parent, we all know that. Goofy, sure, he's fun, but-"

He stopped. Sat up. José shifted away a bit to give him room, looking over as well.

Over the edge of the hill, he could feel the faintest tinge of magic.

He quietly pulled out his new staff and flicked it at the edge.

“Hey!”

“You need to get better at eavesdropping, kid,” Donald huffed, flopping back into Panchito’s lap. “Shield your magic, for one. And try not to gasp at dramatic moments, honestly, you could have gotten more information in the Tower if you hadn’t burst through the doors so early.”

Sora scowled, crossing his arms and falling to sit on the ground. Riku, Kairi, Aqua *and* Ventus popped up after him, peering at them curiously before slowly walking over. Axel was nowhere to be seen, and wasn’t *that* a puzzle?

“Well, we should have brought a blanket!” José laughed, settling back against Donald. “We could have a picnic!”

“We could still do that?” Kairi offered, looking slightly uncomfortable. “Maybe we could pick up some ice cream!”

“Oh, is there an ice cream shop around? We could go grab some right now!” Aqua added; Donald wondered if she just wanted out of this conversation or wanted to have a treat after being trapped for so long.

Both were viable.

Sora was glaring. Donald was tired.

“Why don’t you all do that? Sora, I need to talk to you for a second, if you could stay back.”

Subtle, it was not. But the varying teenagers took the escape and started scrambling over the hill again. Kairi lingered long enough for Sora to make eye contact and grin at her, before ducking back over. Riku never even twitched; Donald didn’t mind that, honestly. Sora could use some support, and Riku was close to Mickey. He probably had some questions himself.

Of course Mickey had probably told them everything they wanted to know back at the Tower. Pity Donald didn’t know what secrets he’d kept and which he’d revealed.

Ah well.

He waited until he was sure the others had moved away (Aqua was very good at shielding, Kairi less so), before turning to look at Sora and bracing himself.

“Alright, go ahead. What’s on your mind?”

Sora glowered at him, silent. Riku looked between them for a long moment, before groaning, shuffling a bit closer and elbowing Sora in the side with a huff.

“Doofus over here can’t decide if he wants to ask you things or give you the silent treatment,” he explained with a fond eye roll, before glancing at the Cabs with a wry grin. “I’m Riku, by the way.”

“Ah!” Panchito said with a bright nod. “I am Panchito, and this is José! Yes, Kairi spoke of you! She said you are a very good friend.”

Riku beamed at that.

“What, did Donald not mention us at all either?” Sora grumbled, looking up finally. His eyes were slightly red.

Donald felt like crying.

“That secrecy thing went both ways,” he said quietly, over Panchito’s nervous ‘er…’, “I couldn’t think of a way to talk about you without explaining why they couldn’t *meet* you. We didn’t even know they could follow me here.”

“So you’ve got this whole family back *home,* and they don’t know about any of us here. And nobody here knows anything about your real life,” Sora grumbled. Donald hissed through his beak, wanting to scoot closer, but when he leaned slightly, Sora leaned back.

“Sora, it wasn’t by *choice-”*

“Come on! You couldn’t find a single way to tell me something? *Anything?* I didn’t know you had kids! Or had- what, boyfriends? Or a sister! I thought-” He sniffled.

“I thought you just didn’t trust me. Cause whenever we visited Disney I kept waiting to, I don’t know… see your house or something? Or, I figured you had family somewhere, like that Dagobert guy or the kids with the shop, but you never said anything there either…”

Donald opened his beak, but what could he even say? He’d just done what he usually did; didn't offer information, and people usually didn’t realize that Donald rarely spoke about himself. He hadn’t realized that Sora had *noticed.* Nobody noticed when Donald just asked about *their* lives instead.

“It wasn’t because I don’t trust you, Sora. Just- it was easier, I suppose, not saying anything and letting you just draw your own conclusions. Instead of giving half answers that would probably make you ask more things I couldn’t answer.”

He didn’t like how familiar this conversation felt. With how active he’d been at home, with PK and Double Duck, and now *this* delay in getting home, how long before he was having the same conversation again.

And again, and again, and again. Secrets within secrets within secrets.

“You couldn’t just say it was a secret?”

“You wouldn’t have been more hurt by that?” Donald asked, but he just felt sad. “And no, the spell is… “

“Very picky!” Panchito interrupted. “You didn’t even look like you could breathe!”

“It *did* look pretty bad, Sora,” Riku offered. He’d been quietly watching Sora’s face the entire time, quiet.

“I don’t like being lied to.” Sora said. He was sitting loosely cross legged, hands fidgeting in his lap.

“I *am* sorry, Sora.”

Sora looked at him for a long moment, face pursed in thought. Then he nodded, decisively, and scooted closer.

“I *guess* it’s okay. If it never happens, ever again. So! Tell me everything!”

Thankfully for Disney and Mickey’s secrets, the things Sora wanted to know were more of the personal variety. How many kids did he *really* have, how old were they, did he really only have nieces and nephews, could he meet them (Donald told him Mickey was in charge of *that* , but he would bring photos when he came next), was he married (he seemed *excited* that the answer was no, asking if he could attend. Panchito agreed before Donald could open his beak, so that would… well, worst case scenario they could just have two? (was he sweating at the idea of a wedding?!)), and so on.

Donald got the impression, as he talked about Lena and Webby’s addition to the family, though, that Sora wasn’t sure what he even wanted to know. Or what to ask.

So he focused on answering *thoroughly.* All the kids, all the family, the adventures and his life for the most part. He *did* skip the spy and hero work, just to avoid making this too confusing, but honestly he didn’t think Sora actually cared about what he did for work; it was

refreshing.

He might just think that Donald was a mage back home, he supposed, but he focused on answering what he was asked. Like the question of where he lived, since the Disney Castle wasn't actually his home. Sora seemed mildly impressed by the news that Donald lived on a boat, nodding sagely while he described the work in building it.

"We were building a raft to sail away from the islands, before the whole, you know, Keyblade thing," he told them through a mouthful of ice cream; the others had returned once the topic had lightened up, and no, Donald was not suspicious of it.

At least they had brought ice cream. And a blanket, though its origins remained a mystery.

"Don't think we'd have gotten far though," he added, more to Riku and Kairi, who both laughed.

"Hey, you never know, Captain Hook's ship could sail between worlds!" Riku pointed out.

"And Monstro ate Geppeto's ship, so he was sailing around *somewhere*. Also, Monstro in general," Donald added. "Hmm. Probably best you didn't do it, though. Your raft wouldn't have been very fast."

"Yeah, the Gummi ship is way better for travel," Sora agreed, tapping absently at his phone. Given everyone *else* was already here, Donald had to assume he was trying to reach Goofy or Mickey.

"When things are quieter, maybe we can teach everyone to use a

Keyblade glider," Aqua offered. She and Ventus were sitting close together; he'd been quiet. Occasionally he'd stare at the others, frowning. Donald wondered if he could remember anything from when he'd been part of Sora. If he was experiencing some strange kind of whiplash, being out and about again, instead of observing from behind some else's eyes.

"That wouldn't really work for Donald and Goofy," Ventus did offer, blinking when they all glanced at him. "I mean, you're not a Keyblade wielder, and all."

"No, but we'd still have the Gummi ship, we'd be fine," Donald agreed. "Might be nice for Riku though, you and Mick don't usually fly."

"How *do* they get around, then?" Panchito asked; he'd laid down in the sun to nap, but was peering up at them from underneath his sombrero. José was flopped against his legs now, observing quietly. Or he might be sleeping sitting up; his hat shaded his eyes too much to be certain.

"Magic portals, most of the time. We do have a ship, though. Just don't use it much," Riku explained. "And it's a bit… small. Since it was his personal one, before."

"He can afford a bigger one!" Sora insisted, laughing. "He's the King!"

"Donal'! Donal'! Can we get one? I want to fly a ship!" Panchito asked, sitting up fully now. José nearly toppled at the change, but let the movement drop him into Panchito's lap instead, dragging his hat up to block his eyes.

"We *have* one!"

“Well, I want to fly in it before we go home!”

“You guys could go on a flight; Ven and I aren’t exactly in good shape to fight yet, and it sounds like Mas- like Xehanort needs us able to fight him for his plan to work,” Aqua offered. Ventus perked up.

“Could we visit Radiant Gardens? I haven’t been there in a long time. It’s… it’s still there, right?” He asked, losing steam until Sora started nodding.

“Yeah! And we’ve got a bunch of friends there, we could visit and see them. Oh! And check on the whole fake body thing for Roxas!”

“Donald, you said that Merlin lives there as well, yes? If we are visiting anyway, we could speak to him more privately,” José offered quietly. Probably hoping that nobody would hear it over their own enthusiasm.

“Why do you need to talk to Merlin?” Unfortunately, José hadn’t accounted for Sora, still paying very close attention and now staring with interest. Donald winced, but he had promised. No more lies.

“I have an old injury, magic one, that’s been bothering me lately. Hoping she might have some insight, there aren’t as many experts on our end in this kind of thing.”

None, in fact. There had been volunteers to try and treat the other Blot survivors, but they’d never managed much besides making them comfortable. Unless some new discoveries had been made. But even if they *had,* Donald wasn’t a listed victim.

“Why not ask… oh. I guess you and Master Yen Sid don’t really… get along?” Kairi asked, frowning as she considered it. “He was a bit rude, earlier. Didn’t like that you’d left, either.”

“His Tower doesn’t have any *food,* and some of us don’t like living off of Potions,” Donald grumbled, before sighing. “And no, he’s of the opinion I’m not fulfilling my duties as Court Mage correctly. I’m of the opinion it’s none of his business how I do my job, it’s still getting done.”

Donald was *also* of the opinion the man was far too comfortable with child soldiers. Aqua was at least an adult when she received her mastery; the others were not. He knew objectively it wasn’t like he chose who got the Keyblades, but he seemed far too eager to get them out in the field before they’d even finished puberty.

“Why does he- ow!” Sora started, before someone (Riku? Kairi was a bit too far) clearly elbowed him into silence.

“Um, well, I’m sure he’s wrong, you’re clearly a great-” Kairi started.

“I can’t create magic. At all.” Donald said. “That’s the injury.”

He stared out at the town. He felt the Cabs shift to sit by him, but honestly, he felt alright. Less worried, honestly. Maybe this wasn’t that bad. At least this one he *chose* to reveal.

Then the shouting started. Phooey.

Curses and Blessings

Donald didn't even really process the yelling as anything other than noise for several minutes. They were mostly yelling at each other, at least, but it was probably something important. He should be trying to process it.

Instead he let himself slump, arms crossed on top of his knees, and stared out at the sunset. The sky always seemed to hold at sunset here. Not literally, but the light lingered at the end. Held just above the horizon a bit longer than it should. Twilight Town certainly earned its name.

It was pretty. Webby would like it here, he mused. Would love to explore. Dewey, he'd have to drag off of the high rails and walls, and if saw the other kids skateboarding *on* the railings it would all be over.

Huey would probably stay close. Or in the library, at least, which usually didn't get too many heartless. Might be the first place Louie would *want* to adventure, with literal gold so easy to find, though.

He missed them. *Gods,* he missed them. He wanted to go home. But then he missed Sora, and he never really saw Mickey or Goofy outside of this place. But this place… he didn't know if he hated it here because of the danger, or just the resentment. Of the secrets, of the bounds of duty, of the rules and the fact that Mickey *could* have chosen to leave them bound by magic had he been inclined.

"I'm sure he had a very good reason!"

"He called him a *lackluster mage* when he's apparently *permanently injured!"*

Sora was heated; Aqua looked apologetic, the others uncomfortable. Donald sighed, low and long.

"Sora, it's fine. Yen Sid doesn't even know."

"But-"

"It's *fine.* I didn't tell him. On purpose, not because of the spell." He explained quietly. "It's not something I like to talk about, and it wasn't relevant."

Not that he had any doubts Yen Sid would be getting an earful when they returned to the Tower, he noted with wry amusement. Which meant that Mickey and Goofy would be finding out as well, and unlike the teenagers here, they would understand the significance.

Secrets and secrets and lies. He wondered if Mickey would think to ask about his 'best friend' Paperinik.

"Okay, but… *how* can you do magic? If you can't, uh, create it? If, um, if you're okay answering that?" Kairi asked, leaning forward. Her face was flushed; he knew she'd been yelling, but he genuinely had no idea what she'd said.

"Magic staves. They're pre-loaded with magic in the crystals, so as long as I replace them, it's fine. Not ideal, but fine."

"Oh, *that's* why you replace them so often! I didn't know they already had magic in them!" Kairi replied, head tilting to the side with a

smile. Aqua nodded, settling back into her seat cautiously. Ventus patted her hand.

"Yes, they're made for when other magics may not be available to you. Usually it's because, well, most people use the Light for magic, and with the growing Darkness… it's good to have a back up."

"Wait, does the Keyblade have that too? Can it run out?" Riku asked now.

"It can't run out, no. You're accessing the Light through the blade, but it's different than creating it yourself. The Light flows through you out the blade," she replied. Donald nodded absently. It was hard to sense the difference in the moment, but Sora casting spells felt far more like elemental magic than forged magic.

José gave him a look; Donald grinned back.

He did feel lighter. Maybe too light though, like he was floating when he wanted solid ground.

His chest ached. It had ached constantly since Olympus. Not strongly, but never ending. José had a point, he really did need to fix this before it became any worse. He ought to be counting his (few) lucky stars that his stunt in the Realm of Darkness hadn't seemed to do anything.

Besides leaving a terrible taste in his mouth.

"Wait, but you didn't have your staff in the Realm of Darkness," Sora said, frowning. "I saw you, your eyes were glowing and you were

dripping that weird black goop!”

“That was… something else,” Donald said vaguely, rubbing his chest. Now that he was paying attention to it, it really did hurt. Was it getting worse, or was he just acknowledging it finally? “Kind of like how the Keyblade works, but not with Light.”

“Then… you were using the power of Darkness?” Sora said slowly, and now all eyes were on him, wide and concerned. He wondered if he still had streaks of tar in his feathers.

“ *No.* That would be monumentally stupid,” he grumbled, rubbing his eyes. “For me, at least. Too volatile. No, it was the ocean.”

Quiet, for a moment.

“You can do that?” Aqua asked. “I was taught that nothing but the Light was safe for use. Too easy to corrupt, I suppose.”

“I don’t know how it relates to Keyblades, but whoever told you that was right, it’s dangerous,” Donald agreed easily. “It’s a lot harder to keep yourself together, and sometimes alternate sources of magic can be particular.”

“Particular?”

“About who uses them, or how, or when,” he explained, and found he was short of breath. His chest throbbed. “There are rules, and no manual to read. If you do it wrong, you can die, or there’s backlash, or…”

He trailed off, huffing. Why was it so hard to breathe?

“So, can anything be a source of magic? Or does it have to be *big* things, like the ocean, or, uh, the sky?” Sora asked with interest, leaning in.

“They *can* be anything, but the bigger, the more powerful. The magic in a single blade of grass can be used or directed, but it is only as powerful as that blade of grass, you see?” José answered, shifting forward to explain. “This is the same for all kinds of magic. But some can be used *or* taken, and some cannot. The ocean, at least at home, cannot be taken, but if one is careful, it can be directed. This is what Donald did. Of course, it had some strange side effects, but that was because the water itself was very strange.”

“Didn’t you do something similar? With the air?” Aqua asked. “I remember you glowing…”

Donald tuned out, focusing on breathing. Slowly, the pain subsided to where it had been.

What had happened? He hadn’t even been doing magic, nobody around them was doing anything, it had just come out of *nowhere*.

“Donal’?” Panchito murmured, leaning in so the brim of his hat hid their moving lips. “Are you alright?”

He tried to answer, but found that he could hardly force air through the sudden burst of pain that retook his chest in a flare that had him doubling over, gagging and wheezing. There were several shrieks. His ears were ringing.

“I think,” he whispered, looking up with wide eyes, tears streaming, “we should go back to the Tower.”

“What *foolish* thing did you-”

“Merlin, can I borrow you for a Healing consultation?” Donald interrupted. He was sweating, though a few slammed Potions had taken the edge off enough to travel back to the Tower, leaving the kids behind to- well, he’d like to say enjoy the rest of the afternoon, but he was willing to bet his near collapse had put a damper on the day.

Shame. The weather was nice, and they were likely to be facing a horrible end soon.

Panchito, one of Donald’s arms thrown over his shoulder, poked him in the ribs. José, under the other one, shushed him, though the exchange had been silent.

“I- well, I’m certainly willing to give it a shot, though I must confess that my healing abilities aren’t quite top notch,” Merlin agreed, trailing after them while Panchito helped Donald along. José slipped out from their trio to open the door to the fitting room where, thankfully, the fairies were not currently residing.

“You-” Yen Sid began, but Donald accidentally kicked the door shut.

Really. An accident.

Magically locking it? Less so. José glared at him for the spell, but honestly it didn't even *hurt*.

"So, what seems to be the trouble, precisely? You do look rather the worse for wear, compared to earlier today. Though I am glad to see that darkness fading away," Merlin chattered, opening his bag. Several things flew out, mostly a number of gizmos and gadgets that did who knew what, though there was also a stool that he sat in rather primly. Another sat itself in front of Donald, gesturing with a leg for him to sit.

He did. He wasn't sure he could keep standing.

"An old magic wound is flaring up. Bad. I'm hoping you can see what the damage is; there've been a few events recently that have… irritated it." Donald said carefully, rubbing at his chest. "I'm not really sure how bad it is, I've never been able to get it looked at."

"I see, I see… and how old, exactly, is this wound?"

"About twenty years, I think?" He offered with a wince. Merlin looked down at him sternly.

"Now young man, I would hope you don't normally leave these things to fester for that long! Goodness, imagine having an injury so long without having it checked, my, my…" So saying, he tugged his wand out of his sleeve and gestured at Donald. "Is there a physical scar for me to examine?"

"No, there was never any visible damage," Donald explained. José slipped away towards the door, then shadow walked underneath it.

Panchito walked over to lean against it, which, coincidentally, meant it couldn't be opened. "Purely metaphysical damage, and I'm not the best at visualizing that."

"Hmm. Well, let me take a look."

He held out a wand and began to murmur. Merlin's spells weren't Donald's forte, so the incantations washed over him like the chatter of a brook instead of anything comprehensible. He closed his eyes, focusing on deep breaths.

Of course, when he had nothing else to distract him from the pain…

In. He recalled the burning of magic and power through him as he slit the Cyclopes' neck.

Out.

In.

Out. The roaring of the volcano's fire and the agony of the wait.

In. The clawing desperation of something too frantic to be reasoned with, a person drowning and dragging him down with it.

Out.

In.

Out.

In. The ripping, screaming *horror* as something was torn from him before he truly understood. When the faith in his cause faded and left him numb and shaking.

Out. The rage that had taken over instead.

In. His fists into the Blot's strangely scarred face, the world a pinprick that only showed his target and nothing else.

Out.

In.

Out. The rotting taste of death and decay pouring out of every orifice of the lab. The lick of flame as he'd burned it down, a week after the trial ended.

In.

Out. He would need to find a way to cleanse the theatre too.

In.

Out.

“Goodness me, what *did* this to you?!” Merlin exclaimed, rearing back until his stool threatened to topple over entirely. Donald blinked slowly, feeling like he was just waking up - how long had they been sitting here?

“A gun, of sorts. Designed to remove magic from, well, anything. People, creatures, artifacts. Rumor has it the inventor even tried taking from the earth; a tree or cave, maybe. *Something* that bit back; he’s got some horrific scars from that,” Donald said, and felt his beak twist up into a truly vicious smile at the thought.

“What on earth *for?”*

“To remove magic, destroy it. He hates magic, hates anyone that uses it, wants the world free from it entirely. Yes, *I* know it’s impossible, but have you ever tried to reason with a madman?”

Merlin huffed, but it seemed more to cover up his troubled expression, and he quickly began summoning a teapot and the fixings from his bag, along with a table for them, hands shaking. Doing so seemed to calm him down, so Donald didn’t interrupt.

“So, he took your innate magic, I see… and, I imagine, this is why you struggle to create your own supply now? This damage?”

Donald considered the question, silently accepting the tea he was offered. It was nice and strong, and hot enough to nearly scald his tongue.

“As far as we know,” he said slowly, “the *removal* is permanent. None of the survivors can do it anymore. I won’t be regenerating magic

again. Ever. What worries me is the pain; it was bad, when it first happened, but that faded eventually. But I was… hit, by… it's hard to explain. A sentient force of magic that was trying to go through me to escape the artifact it was being held in. I think when it did that, it tried to use the same pathways forged magic would have, and mine are scarred over, so…"

Merlin was watching him with a pensive expression. He seemed sad.

"And I imagine, should one attempt to use the magic they once wielded, they might cause additional damage along those same pathways," he offered pointedly. Donald winced, and from the corner of his eye saw Panchito perk up, eyeing him.

Phooey.

"Elemental magic avoids those paths entirely, since the magic is already created, it's just being directed back out," he said evasively, before sighing. "But yes, you're right. The same source tends to be… painful."

Excruciating, really. But why worry about the details.

"Donal'...?"

"Storkules," he answered shortly, and curled around his chest with a frown. "It's- it wasn't magic, it was a blessing, but-"

But the difference was negligible. Nothing, really. An attempt to use words to differentiate between individual waves on an endless sea. Blessings were curses were spells were enchantments- they all

operated the same way. Intention and magic goes in, results come out.

Gladstone's luck was a luck *curse* after all.

Panchito shifted like he wanted to step closer, but frowned and stayed against the door. Donald didn't know if he was guarding it or just trying to give Donald space, but he appreciated it. His skin felt clammy and chilled; the last thing he wanted, unfortunately, was physical contact.

"Hmm. Well, I can confirm I can *see* the damage, but unfortunately I don't know for sure what to do about it. This is certainly a new form of injury to me. Perhaps someone else would have more insight…?"

He meant Yen Sid, most likely. Who may or may not be trying to beat down the door. Donald felt a brief moment of enraged panic, a wild animal gnawing on a trapline, before he shook it off with weary acceptance. José and Panchito were worried. *He'd* made them worry even more, because of his secrecy and by brushing this off. He needed to handle this before it got worse.

He needed to be able to go *home,* and not have this chase him, so if that meant letting Yen Sid look, he would have to accept that.

Donald let himself zone back out while Merlin left the room for a moment. Or maybe he was talking to Panchito.

At the very edges of his awareness, he could feel water flowing. He knew this world was supposed to have a beach, somewhere. He let himself follow the feeling of water, the ebb and flow, salt on the tip of his tongue. It felt better than the ache of the heroic. The weight of responsibility that straightened the spine and called the soul to action.

The water felt odd, though, as he tuned in. Normally an ocean felt like it went on forever, the edges only theoretical because all water connected back to the ocean somewhere. The storm to the river to the sea. This, though, felt… cut off. Broken from the flow. Only part of the whole.

There should be an entire water cycle here. Just another sign these worlds were *broken.* Though, he had to wonder… how hard would it be to reconnect them…?

He shouldn't. They were quarantined for a *reason,* and it wasn't his call. That decision was far above his head, and the worlds were probably far too scattered to cleanly reconnect even if it was possible. Too long apart.

And yet.

He reached out. Just a bit more, pressing right at the edges, trying to feel what they even *were*- they felt sharp, but gave slightly under his mental push. From the other side, a corresponding push back, like water rippling back on the other side.

The other side felt oily. Dark. Something that should scare him off.

The barrier felt thin. So thin, it would be so easy to-

"What are you *doing?"*

Donald lost his focus, and for a moment felt the world tip. The ship

wobbled, his body neared the water, and he could just let go and *fall-*

He pulled back, shaking his head. His tongue tasted like salt and ash.

Yen Sid was glaring at him, Merlin wringing his hands. José and Panchito slid around them to stand by Donald, like barriers. He leaned against Panchito's shoulder.

There was noise further back in the Tower; sounded like the others were coming back. So long, any semblance of privacy, he chuckled to himself, and Yen Sid's face soured further.

"Meditating. Did you know, the barriers between worlds are really thin?" He asked, because if he had to be uncomfortable so did everyone else.

Unfortunately, the distraction didn't work.

"You come here to serve as a *mage,* with magical damage you have never once reported to anyone, and now you're making jokes. Does the safety of the multiverse mean nothing to you?!" Master Yen Sid was *mad.*

So was Donald. The anger slid up his spine and into his face, and for once he had no interest in holding back.

The ocean rippled in the back of his mind.

"Oh, I'm *sorry,* I was supposed to report my personal *medical history* to

magical kidnappers? Do you normally tell people your greatest weaknesses when you first meet them?" Donald snarled, standing up and stepping forward; the floor creaked. "I crash land in some random castle with a queen I've never met telling me I've been *chosen* for some great destiny for the umpteenth time, and I was supposed to, what? Trust her right away? Just go 'oh yes, here's everything about me, by the way I'm allergic to kiwis and sleep like a rock!' You know, just in case!"

"The fate of our worlds-"

"The fate of *your* world hinges on child soldiers and unwilling draftees being willing to throw themselves into the maw of the abyss for the sake of people they've never met! Maybe you should rethink your methods! It's not like this one has actually *worked!"*

Donald stormed closer, and the world seemed to be shrinking, he was too hot and steaming and the target of his anger had *such* a breakable nose. His ears were roaring, or maybe that was a brewing storm.

"My life is none of your *fucking* business, you are in no way my boss or King, frankly if I had my way you'd be stripped of your damned title for your failure to ever do a *single* thing to help in this battle, and I am sick to death of hearing you lecture me because of a *perceived* weakness! *If I was actually failing to do my fucking job you would know."*

"Your magical injury would indicate otherwise," Yen Sid snapped back, looking frazzled and enraged himself. "A mage that cannot cast magic is not *suited* for this war. Had you indicated this in the beginning, another candidate could have been chosen."

"That's not true! Donald's been a great help!"

Yen Sid looked startled by their audience. Donald felt like throwing himself out the window and fighting Xehanort himself might be less painful than lingering.

Merlin sidled forward, waving a hand.

“Now, I think we should all take a quick break before we continue! Master Yen Sid, I wanted your expertise on the topic, but perhaps… perhaps another time, I think,” he muttered, rummaging through his instruments that were still out. “I think, yes, I think I can do some research and find a potential treatment...”

“Donald’s saved my life a bunch of times! You don’t get to stand there and insult him!” Sora was still yelling and *wow* Donald was not prepared to help him calm down. He was barely calm *himself,* every inch of him was straining forward to break Yen Sid’s chin-

Oh, that was literal. Panchito was holding his wrist, and José was subtly standing in front of him. Not entirely blocking him, just enough he would be a slight obstacle.

The amulet pulsed with support. They wouldn’t stop him if he really went for it, they were just making sure he’d thought it through first.

“Sora, this goes beyond his ability to assist your mission,” Yen Sid said with his usual gravitas, recovering from his surprise quickly.

“Well what *else* is he supposed to do? King Mickey ordered him to help me, he helps! Sounds like *you* just don’t like how he does it,” Sora snapped, arms crossed.

Donald didn't think Yen Sid had actually had a snarky teenager argue with him in a long while. He looked constipated.

Goofy slipped past the crowd and walked over, Mickey in tow.

"Gawrsh, everyone seems pretty tense in here!" He announced with all the subtlety of a cannonball. Donald choked on a laugh.

"Yeah, uh… what's going on fellas?" Mickey asked.

"My medical history is now relevant to my Court Mage position," Donald said blandly. "Pity they don't have the ADA here."

"Uh…"

"Master Yen Sid keeps insulting Donald because he thinks he's bad at his job!" Sora retorted.

"Sora, I'm sure that isn't what he meant!" Mickey protested immediately, but he hesitated. For just a moment. Donald glanced at Goofy, who also looked disturbed.

"He literally said it!"

"He kinda did, Your Majesty," Riku added awkwardly. "Well, he said that Donald's, er, injury makes him unsuited for fighting here, technically."

“Which means the same thing!” Sora insisted, and Donald was seriously unhappy with how many people were in the room now. His skin felt hot, his senses were going haywire, and he could *still* feel the burning in his chest.

He drank another Potion. It was like taking a single antacid, honestly; took the edge off but left the majority of the pain.

It also gained him several worried gazes, and José finally spoke up.

“Instead of arguing what, precisely, was meant by that line, we have lost sight of the point,” he said patiently, but his gaze was fierce and unwavering. “If we could focus on a potential Healing spell or treatment, that would be more productive.”

“Fine. Donald, hold still,” Yen Sid said, and before Donald could even brace himself, a spell flew forward and struck him straight in the chest.

Of Astronauts and Stars

The stars beckoned.

Their gravity pulled, and prodded, and ripples of asteroids and planets wavered around them. Tidepools of galactic swirls glittered and glowed with light and life, and in between the vastness of space flowed in a slow, never ending orbit around an incomprehensibly vast island of nothing. A black hole, filled with everything and nothing and light and dark.

He shouldn't be here.

Something was pulling him back.

He looked.

He wasn't floating aimlessly, but on a ship. A Gummi ship, he realized, and the name struck some realization in him. He shouldn't be out here, alone. He needed to dock the ship.

The sky dimmed.

Donald opened his eyes. His ears were ringing, his mouth tasted like burnt sugar and smoke. His throat burned in a way that told him he'd been screaming, and his chest burned like he'd just fought the Cyclopes again.

He looked down. Or, forward; he was lying on the ground, head cradled in someone's lap, and above him-

Glowing lights. Diagnostic spells, painkiller spells (well *those* clearly weren't doing much!), and others he couldn't identify floated around him. He couldn't make out what was beyond them.

"Wh't happened *this* t'me?" He forced out, throat seizing and fighting him, and several voices began speaking at once.

"Donald! You're-"

"You shouldn't be *conscious-"*

"-astral projection as a result of the spell-"

"Out, out now! He needs rest, you can visit when he's recovered a touch more! Out, I say!"

Quiet. Donald blinked at the ceiling until he could make sense of things.

José was the lap he was in. Panchito appeared to be holding his hand. The room was empty.

" …nearly lost you, amor, where did you go?"

"... sailing," he answered, because that's what he had felt like. Sailing

through space, a literal astronaut.

What was an astronaut if not a sailor in a sea of stars?

José caught what he really meant, and gripped his spare hand.

“You did not lose your ship, then?”

“Nearly did. Found it, though. Always come back to you,” Donald whispered back, tired beyond belief. “What happened?”

“The spell, it… he claimed it was meant to highlight the full damage so he could better review how spread it was,” José began.

“But instead it opened everything up and sent magic through all those paths and… it hurt you greatly. You were screaming, Donal’, and you fainted very fast.” Panchito added.

Great. Probably scared the shit out of the kids. He winced.

“And then?”

“Well, Merlin called the Fairy Godmother, and the three fairies, and they were able to stop the spell and the pain, we hoped, but you would not wake. It’s been a few days already,” José answered. “They think they have something for the damages, but without you being conscious nobody wanted to try it.”

“D *ays?!* We need to- are they still trying to get to Xehanort?” Donald demanded, trying to sit up. He was held down, and his chest flared.

“Donald! You are injured! Far worse now than you were, in fact!” José told him with heavy concern. “They did not leave without you, but amor, you are in no shape to *go!”*

“It’s my responsibility to go! I’ll be alright, I just need to take something for the pain and-”

“Donal’, this *job* isn’t worth-”

“Fuck the *job,* the *kids* are my responsibility!”

“And will you be *helpful* to them like this?” José demanded.

Silence. Donald froze. Her hadn’t- he’d never-

Had he ever been a *liability* to someone before? In general, sure, he’d messed things up, but in a fight? He was always the protector, the heavy hitter, the person that would take the blows and keep on taking them, because he wasn’t as important, usually. He was just the muscle.

Was he even useful if he couldn’t do that?

He felt unmoored. Adrift and flailing for something solid.

If he couldn't protect these kids, these people and friends that were in so much danger they hadn't had a moment's rest in years, then what was even the point of any of it? Why had he come here, suffered and struggled, if he couldn't actually make sure things *worked?*

"You- you're right," he said, eyes drooping shut again. " *Fuck,* you're right. I need to- I just need to-"

" *Rest."* José told him bluntly. "You need to *rest,* and we will find a solution for this. You cannot pour from an empty pitcher."

Fine. He could- he could rest. Enough to recover at least. He slumped back down.

"How are you?" He asked though. Because they'd been focused on *him,* but José had been the one in the Realm of Darkness. And unlike Donald, he wouldn't have known anything about what was happening until he'd stumbled onto Aqua. And she'd been there herself for so long, gods knew how aware she'd been.

That was a lot to handle. And Donald needed to be sure they were okay. He couldn't handle it if José was hiding an injury.

Like he had been. Maybe they did have a point about secrets.

José breathed out through his beak, smiling ruefully, and Panchito continued to hum.

"I suppose I did ask for that," José admitted. "I am… I still feel rather untethered, I think. As though I was a kite on a string, but the string has become untied. It is a freeing feeling, but a touch overwhelming."

Untethered? Donald frowned. Darkness usually made a person feel cold, emotionless, and yet on a hair trigger, close to exploding at any time at the slightest provocation. This didn't sound like that, it sounded like…

José had nearly lost himself to the *wind.* Of course he would feel like he could just float away.

"It fades, after a while," he offered quietly. "The… mixing. The element seeping into your bones. You've let the connection go, right?"

"Of course," José replied immediately, but he didn't sound offended. "You chased me into my own mind rather well!"

"It was fun, reminding you to have feet," Panchito chuckled. "You were so offended about it!"

Donald laughed, because, well. Outside of everything else, it *had* been funny; the strange storm arguing with them and being rather baffled that they weren't just going to leave him where he was. As though that had ever been a possibility.

"What does it feel like, for you?" He asked.

"Light. Weightless, and yet so fast and strong. I felt as though I could take down a mountain with enough patience," José answered immediately. "But it was hard to focus. My mind and body did not wish to stay in one place."

“I always feel warm,” Panchito said. “Not just the heat, but the feeling of a hot summer day and my mama’s cooking and a loving smile, they are all warm. And I feel them all. It is a lot to contain, but it is so hard to let go of. I feel… *large.* Too large to be Panchito sized, and isn’t that silly? I am always Panchito!”

“Yeah,” Donald sighed, letting his head droop further into Pasnchito’s lap. “You are.”

Panchito gently brushed some feathers out of Donald’s eyes.

“And you? I know you have said before, but you must complete our circle!”

“Cold,” he answered. “Not always a bad cold, but cold. I can taste salt. I feel like I’m moving even when I stand still, and that I could be anywhere, everywhere at once. It was overwhelming, in the beginning, but it’s gotten less so.”

He didn’t say that it scared him. That it had gotten easier. It *didn’t* scare him, and that was what was truly frightening. That he was, on some level, already accepting that he had adapted and grown to better contain a force not meant to be constrained by mortal hands. That he may no longer fully qualify for the title.

“You said they had an idea? To fix the… damage?” He asked after a moment, watching the floating spells. They were pretty to watch, at least, if he ignored their purpose.

“A few adjusted healing spells that might be able to fix some damage without causing more irritation,” José confirmed, while Panchito started to quietly hum again. “They think a power that is more opposed to the ones you have used would be less painful. Earth,

perhaps.”

Earth wasn’t a perfect opposite to volcanic, but it might be far enough, he mused. He didn’t know what an opposite to *Heroic* would be anyway. Cowardice didn’t strike him as something that could heal.

“And they think they can fix the other thing!” Panchito announced.

“What other thing?” Donald asked, already falling back asleep. His entire body felt weighted down, dragging him back to dreamland. Hopefully they’d be less ominous this time…

“The magic creating one!”

Oh, that would be nice…

Wait.

“ *What?!”*

“We’re thinking a crystal, similar to how a mage staff can be used to draw magic in through it as a way to channel magic, only this one will be made to circumvent the damaged parts of your internal magic system,” Merlin explained, pointing to a series of roughly sketched diagrams floating around him. “See, here and here- they’ll act as an alternative path in and out of the body, allowing for magic to be generated and formed without touching the scarred parts! We’re hoping this will stop the ongoing damage from when you are exposed to spells that would normally take this route, as well as restore your natural magical abilities.”

“At the very least, make them operational,” Merlin concluded, before blustering, “Ah, not to undersell your capabilities, but well, I mean to say-”

“I’m not insulted, Merlin, you’re fine,” Donald said faintly, looking over the plans. They had Moogle notes written all over them, and a list of synthesis ingredients listed on the side. “We’re going to need to do a lot of hunting for these, though.”

“Well, now we did talk to Sora while you were resting, and it sounds like you have most of what we need already! For the first attempt, anyway; our Moogle friends have agreed to do tweaking free of charge!” Merlin explained cheerfully. “They’re excited by the new project, you see!”

“If it works, we’ll need more,” Donald explained quietly. “This is- I wasn’t the only victim. I’m not even an *official* victim, it’s a whole- there are others, is my point. And they need this as much as I do.”

Moreso, in his mind, but he didn’t say it. He had other avenues to cast magic, but he didn’t think José or Panchito would appreciate him saying it that way.

“I- oh. I suppose not. Well, once we know for certain it is functional I’m sure we can get them made for you to take with you!”

“I would appreciate that,” Donald said, and the words didn’t feel real. He didn’t think it was possible.

The magic was sound, he could see the mechanics of it and see how it would work, he just- all these years, and there was a potential

solution? Something that could *fix* this?

Sure, it wouldn't be perfect, this was more like a prosthesis than a cure, but they hadn't even had *that*.

Or had they? He'd admit he hadn't checked on how the victims medical treatment had gone. He'd been ashamed, nervous someone could tell what had happened, guilty… for all he knew, he was the only one without something in place. Maybe they'd made their own devices or amulets and he'd just never *asked*.

He knew on some level he was being ridiculous, and that Morgana would probably have said something, if nothing else. That she probably had guessed he or PK had been injured; the Blot hadn't been shy about his weaponry on any interlopers, after all. If there had been anything, she would have told him, he was certain. *He* was the one that was keeping all the secrets, after all.

He thought again about her text. About being proactive this time.

But now wasn't the time to consider that.

Now he was facing Yen Sid, who was pointing a wand at him again. At least this time Donald was prepared if he ended up collapsing in pain again.

"One might wonder how you've survived this long, with this level of damage," Yen Sid mused, but his tone was off. Neutral, instead of the holier-than-thou arrogance he usually had.

Maybe it was the gaggle of Keyblade wielders glaring at him.

Apparently they'd spent most of the time Donald had been unconscious yelling at him for casting the spell without, as Sora had put it, 'thinking for one second about asking the guy first!'

Donald *could* reveal he probably would have let him cast it anyway, since he didn't know it *would* knock him out, but he liked the mildly cowed expression on the old man's face. So he said nothing. Mickey in particular looked apoplectic, and while Donald was going to pay for *that* later, for now he enjoyed having the upperhand by graciously not gloating.

"Some of it is recent," he told him, while the wand moved over him. This time, it only left a faint glow as it passed, though clearly Yen Sid was gaining more information from it than Donald could see. "Within the last few months."

"How old is the original injury?"

"About twenty years, give or take. Time passes funny between the realms."

"Hmm."

He stayed calm. The ocean rippled in the back of his mind; now that he'd connected to it, it came to him easier. He wondered if that would apply to every world that had an ocean on it, or if he'd have to connect to each one individually.

He didn't know why he was considering it. It wouldn't be wise to depend on a power source he couldn't carry with him.

And he was concerned by the darkness he could still find, if he reached.

"And the oceanic magic you referenced was of course from just before you collapsed," Yen Sid mused, but Donald shook his head to that.

"Works differently. Bypasses the damage entirely, actually. I just have to be physically close to the water, and that's not always feasible."

Silence.

Then-

"Hmm."

"Can we see you do it again?" Sora asked after a long pause, peering over at him from where he'd been looming (as best as he could, anyway) over Yen Sid's hunched form at his desk. "I didn't get to get a good look last time, it was neat! You didn't even say a spell!"

"I didn't see it at *all,"* Kairi mumbled, Axel patting her on the shoulder with mock sympathy. "How come we always miss the cool stuff, Axel?"

"Sora should invite us more," he lamented, shaking his head. Donald muffled a laugh into his collar.

"I didn't get to watch neither," Goofy lamented loudly. "Gawrsh, the one adventure I don't go on, and Donald is doing magic tricks!"

More laughter, and the tension in the room dropped. Donald owed Goofy so many favors.

He also owed him an explanation. Goofy was really getting the short end of the stick the last few days; last to know what was happening and not even fussing about any of it.

“Maybe later,” he said to the room because fuck it, this wasn’t home, they knew he had magic *already* and apparently elemental magic wasn’t a taboo. Funny, that. Probably because they were more worried about people using the power of Darkness. Anything that wasn’t *that* seemed to be fine.

Mickey was still watching Yen Sid closely. Donald didn’t actually think he’d blinked.

His chest was numb. He had to hand it to Merlin and Flora, they’d really come through on a pain treatment that worked. Numb was a hell of an improvement over burning.

“So. The Phantom Blot.” Mickey said. Not asked.

They were sitting in a small lounge; them, the Cabs and Goofy, while the kids got some sleep. For the fight with Xehanort, which of course would be soon. They just needed to confirm where. Aqua and Ventus were ready.

Or, at least they were claiming to be. Donald just had to pray they were right.

“The Blot.” He agreed.

Goofy nodded thoughtfully.

“Always wondered what happened,” he said, chewing on his lip as he spoke. “Y’know, after school. You were pretty quiet when he got caught, always thought you knew something.”

Donald laughed. It wasn’t a pleasant one.

“You could say that, yeah.”

Quiet, for a while.

“You could have told us, you know,” Mickey muttered. “Maybe not then, but- you could have said something.”

“Mick, I don’t tell *anyone* this. I just- don’t.” He muttered, and maybe it was the stress of the situation, maybe he just hadn’t slept well, maybe he’d *lost his mind,* but- “Is it really that bad that I just want to keep this to myself? Gods forbid I just don’t make a fuss over something I couldn’t change!”

José and Panchito, who had been sitting next to him, shifted slightly. Probably to try and calm him down. Maybe to just get out of the blast zone.

Donald stood up instead, fists clenched, teeth grit, because he couldn't lose focus, he needed to not lose control of his fists.

Which meant his beak had free reign instead.

"Why does everyone constantly want me to *talk* lately?! What's the point?! Nobody listens to me most of the time, hell, most of the time people barely *understand* me, literally! Why do you all get to suddenly decide I haven't said enough?!"

"Don, pal, you were *injured!* We could have helped, but instead-"

"You don't think I know that?!" He screamed, not even at Mickey. At himself. "You don't think I know that every stupid fucking secret I keep is one that could hurt someone? Hurt me? That I could probably get people killed because I can't open my stupid fucking beak and tell them 'hey, I'm permanently magically disabled! It hurts all the time and could have long term consequences!' I can't tell anyone about it because they'll just *worry* and then I have to deal with that on *top* of everything else, and what good does that do?!"

Secrets and secrets and lies.

"Donal'," Panchito said quietly. "Please do not attack yourself for being hurt. This is not your fault."

" *It was."* His mouth moved and his fists tightened and everything around him was awash in blurring red and blue. "I was so fucking *stupid,* I thought I knew everything and that we'd be fine, that *I* would be fine, I wasn't a magic user anyway, I could take the hits-

“And each one hurt. I lost *track* and everything was just burning and screaming and people trying to get out of the building and I- I-”

Had felt *wrong.* Not determined or focused like he’d been before, the blessing ripped from his skin and had left nothing but rage. Blinding, burning *rage,* uncontrollable, unfocused, and unceasing.

He’d beaten the Blot over and over and over until the man’s face was practically mush, warping and splotching as the black blot he’d gotten his name from *bled* out of the wounds and overtook his face, covering the torn and bloody flesh. The scarring had been there before, but now-

Now Donald didn’t think he even *had* a face anymore. His mugshot had been a black dripping mess, and from the reports, that hadn’t changed.

The way he’d screamed…

“Don?” Mickey asked.

“Everyone always acts like I’m doing this shit for fun,” Donald said to the window; he could see twinkling stars in the distance, and tried not to think about how it had felt to drift among them. “Keeping secrets. Like it's a game to me. And then they- you all *push* and want me to rip myself open to show you whatever scars I have and act like I’m unreasonable for not wanting to do it. I know I need to talk to people, at least *someone,* but there’s never time for the aftermath, and nobody wants to hear me when I say I can’t handle it.”

A hand closed over his fists. Then two, then four. He sighed.

“I’m sor-”

“No!” José snapped. “You don’t need to apologize. This was not the way to have these conversations. Obviously we wish you had not been hurt, but it was not unreasonable to know your limits, Donald. Please, do not apologize for being hurt.”

“I’m trying to apologize for being *stubborn,”* he grumbled, and was soundly ignored.

“Can you just promise us something?” Goofy asked. He’d been silent until now, frowning. “Tell someone next time you get hurt? Don’t have to be a big deal, but one other ear listenin’ would make us all feel a heap better. Promise I won’t ask questions you don’t wanna answer if you pick me!”

Donald let out another sigh; it rattled as it left, but his chest didn’t let out the usual ache. He hadn’t realized how painful it was until he abruptly couldn’t feel it anymore.

“Thank you. I mean it. But… Can we please change the subject?” He asked. Begged. Prayed.

“I have a way to do that!” Panchito announced immediately. And he stepped back to reach into his hat. Or, to be completely accurate, a small pocket spell he kept *in* his hat.

And pulled out three bottles of tequila.

“Panchito! We have a war to prepare for!”

“No better time! ¡Salud!”

Donald was floating in the dark. Bobbing in the waves, but felt no water.

Above him, the sky opened and yawned, the crashing of waves echoing over colliding asteroids and galaxies. The stars gleamed, pulling planets and dust around them in a twirling dance, themselves spinning and orbiting a vast galaxy spiral that slowly drifted across space. A vast bog of life and movement in a sea of quiet.

He drifted.

The sky beckoned.

It felt…

Intrigued.

Interlude: Magic Lessons Feat. Magica

She'd known, of course. It was hard not to feel the pressure of magic use so close to her home, after all, even if she wasn't familiar with the pair. So after the first lesson, when Lena's innate burning blue magic of *friendship,* such a ridiculous thing, burst through the woods in fits and spurts of a fledgling witch, she had realized what was happening.

It was natural, after all. Lena had been created from Magica's magic, of course, but she had been reforged by her friends and pulled from the shadow realm with *that* power in her veins. It was completely to be expected that Lena's natural magic would shift after such an experience.

If she felt some *disappointment,* that her ex-niece no longer used the shadows that their family had always favored, well- only Poe knew.

Poe had always known her too well. Uncomfortable after so many years, but certainly familiar.

He'd only had to give her a *look,* when she'd talked about slipping out to the grove she'd scoped out, and she had folded like wet paper.

He hadn't been pleased to hear how Lena came to exist. The creation, that was fine, he hadn't expected her to want to create a child the normal way after all, but everything afterwards… Lena referring to her as aunt had been such an odd thing, Magica had felt a strange crawling feeling at the title, like it wasn't hers to claim.

Lena refusing to do so anymore was worse.

Poe hadn't been sympathetic. She hadn't expected him to be. She could claim that Lena was a tool all she liked; she had given the shadowling their mother's name. No amount of protest would erase Poe's natural conclusion. And because of *that,* he was more than willing to call her out on her misplaced priorities. Revenge on McDuck had superseded any and all other goals. Money, fame, Lena, even her own twin, those things that she could have had with ease all faded to the background in the face of simple vengeance.

She hadn't expected Lena to switch sides. She hadn't considered Lena having an *opinion* at all, except where it interfered with her plans.

Perhaps if she had paid more attention, she would have. But she hadn't.

The clearing they used was nothing special; it was close enough to McDuck's Manor to reach in a short hike, away enough for privacy in the ever-growing clan around him. Lena's magic lay in wisps and puddles here, leaving streaks of glowing joy and safety that made Magica's feathers tingle.

Shadow magic was all about illusion; it lent itself to sneaking along the edges and sliding below attention. It was the basis for transformation, because what was a transformation if not an illusion brought to life? She could cloak herself in shadow and no-one, not even Poe, could detect her. She could change someone into another thing, an object or animal, and even they couldn't see through it.

This magic, though… this magic felt so vastly different she could barely understand it. Couldn't see the potential of friendship as a means of magic. She couldn't deny it was *powerful,* which made sense, it was *her* niece after all, but she couldn't say what utility it would ever serve.

Poe had scoffed at that thought, when she had voiced it.

"You've really fallen far, sister, if you're considering magic only in terms of what it can *do*. Magic simply *is*. You seem to have forgotten that."

She scowled at the memory. The glowing blue in front of her seemed to mock her by glowing brighter.

She wasn't here for Lena's developing magical core anyway. Let the girl shift to some friendship based power and learn how to wield it however she wanted, Magica didn't care.

She was here for Lena's teacher.

Donald Duck, she had only interacted with a few times, and briefly at that. An attempted kidnapping once or twice before her imprisonment, and she knew he had been at the fight at the Money Bin, but he was largely below her notice. Until now.

The *flare* of power when their plane had landed, that had truly been spectacular. It was clearly not his own power, she had been able to see it was raw. Unformed.

Volatile.

And clearly volcanic, and while she had never paid attention to him in detail, she knew he was no volcanic elemental. Something far *colder* called to his soul. So clearly the power was from something else; some relic that McDuck had unearthed somewhere, obviously, which was now causing mayhem. She'd traveled the short distance to the beach

to watch the fallout, watch McDuck see how magic could turn on you when you didn't know what you were doing. When you in fact intentionally avoided knowing, seeing the practice of magic as beneath him.

When she had arrived, though, she felt something *else.* The volcano, roaring and hissing flames and all, being surrounded by a heat that was somehow *more,* while wind and water swirled in and around the mess. She had thought of the volcano's magic as unforged, and here was the forging; the heat and water and air working seamlessly to reshape it. Not into a spell or a gem, but something else entirely.

Later, she would find that that had been an egg. That those three elements, the *sun* and *wind* and *sea* had taken that energy and created a new life. The primordial forces, the elements that could not, would not, allow themselves to be debased into something as simple as a *spell,* came together willingly to create this egg.

At the time, she had been preparing to flee, certain that McDuck or his nephew had stepped too far in desperation and was meddling with something that did not allow itself to be meddled with. The sun and the wind, they were forgiving, in a way; they would only kill the foolish wielder that thought they could handle the forces of nature and life itself.

But the ocean. The ocean was far less willing to forgive. The ocean was happy to drown an entire city, entire islands even, to remove the nuisance of a mage who attempted to control it. She had been dead certain she was going to drown in a tsunami made of the worst rages of the seas, only for them to wind down into a gentle flow like nothing had happened.

It was terrifying. It was *fascinating,* to the point that she had allowed herself to get closer. Saw it was Duck, and Lena, alone on the beach, Duck glowing with burning scars. Not unscathed, clearly, but equally alive when he should be dead and drowned.

She hadn't truly thought she could blackmail him. She hadn't thought *anything,* besides not wanting to leave this exciting bit of possibility.

Poe was gone, gone, gone, no tracking spell she had ever created had had enough power to see through her own magic and find something so similar, but *this*… this might be enough.

And it had been. For the first time in decades, she had her brother back in her arms, snarking about her choices and throwing her life into disarray, and she couldn't be happier.

But that possibility niggled in the back of her mind.

The ocean was unforgiving. Whatever Duck had done, whatever items or spells or artifacts he had should never have done what he had done so effortlessly. His tracking spell was simple, but it had worked, and watching him lay the spell had awoken such a fascination in Magica she was almost startled herself.

To create a spell, one had to find the power first, then form it into the right shape to Become. This was the way, even for magical creatures; reach for the power, then form it into the shape of a spell with Intention. But he hadn't done that. He'd created the spell *first,* she had seen it around his fingers, blank and powerless, a shape that needed filling. Then power had flowed *through* him, like he was no more than a funnel into the spell on his hands, and the spell had taken form and Become all at once.

She'd tried to replicate it. Mostly out of curiosity. But she couldn't manage the two tasks at once; she had to reshape the magic to even know how to make it into the spell, she couldn't just allow shadows to flow through her like she had seen him accomplish.

The obsession was enough that she was here, snooping at the grove where she had sensed him and Lena training.

Neither were here. She'd planned for that, not wanting to risk being exposed so early in her examination. Her shadow travels were beyond compare, but she would admit she didn't quite know Lena's capabilities. If being forged from shadows or being forced within the shadow realm for a time had given her any insight into other beings moving within them.

Best not to test it, at least this time.

But she was frustrated to find there were no apparent traces of Duck's magic anywhere in the clearing. *That* was what she wanted to see, to understand, but apparently he wasn't bothering to cast any spells while teaching Lena. How was he showing her what she needed to do without an appropriate example?

Unless his bizarre method of spellcasting didn't *leave* traces behind. She certainly hadn't been in the right mind to check when they had rescued Poe, and she could hardly revisit the beach. She'd been lucky it was so unoccupied at the time; it was constantly crawling with McDuck's-

No, not his. *Duck's* nephews and cousins and sister and friends. The ones he had bargained for, mostly, with extraneous adults she didn't know and didn't care about; the green parrot had some shadow magic himself, which had been intriguing, but it was faint, a family practice likely.

But it was Duck that lived on the beach, him and the green one, who reeked of a luck curse several generations strong. She didn't dare get

near *him* either, and between the two the beach was rarely unoccupied. McDuck she didn't see, and she was glad for it; seeing him would remind her of all that she had lost chasing after revenge; her brother and fortune and years upon years of time in the shadows. If she saw him, she would want to rip his head off, trap *him* in that damned Dime again, but if she did-

If she did…

She would have to fight the entire family. That was the flaw in her first plan, barely accounting for their loyalty beyond driving a slim wedge. The second plan, with his *other* enemies, people she barely remembered, that had been a silly waste of time. She had some grudging respect for the green nephew, his plan had been simple but effective, but her own plans would never have had such a stupid loophole as using the wrong *name.*

No, when she sought revenge she would do so with all her power behind her. Her own way, with Poe at her side and-

It was just them. They would be more than enough, but first Poe needed to recover. He spent a great deal of time sleeping, now, exhausted by the act of living as a larger, more intelligent creature than he had been in decades. When he was awake he was still acclimating, reading modern books and asking her questions about TV and pizza and politics and anything else he could think of. He wanted to be powerful again, she knew that, and with Poe it was knowledge that was power. They wouldn't be able to simply control a small village like they had before, this era required more finesse.

So he read, and he slept, and he ate enough food to cover for the massive change in size he'd gone through. She did what she could to ease the transition; got books from the library, worked extra hours to get foods he might like, stole seeds and cuttings when she couldn't buy them to restart her garden (and how long had it been since she had a garden?), hoping for berries and herbs to eat when they got

going.

Right now he was reading. And judging, likely, since she was snooping instead of just asking about Lena's training. He seemed to think that asking would be all it took to get answers; he was foolishly naive. He didn't know-

But then again, neither did she. She barely knew Lena, and only recently knew Donald Duck's name at all. Perhaps he would be foolish enough to simply tell her how the training was going, what skills she was gaining, what friendship as a core would lean into: protective magic, perhaps? Would it be bolstered by the more friends Lena gained, the strength of those bonds? Was it purely *friendship,* or did other close emotional bonds tie in?

This was *new,* and Magica could admit she was brimming with curiosity. With the desire to study and explore, in ways she hadn't felt interested in since- since-

Since Poe had flown out that window.

A twig snapped. Magica huffed and tugged her shadow cloak around her, hiding from view. A twig snapping was so cliche, she almost wanted to come out and lecture Lena about her poor sneaking-

But that would be foolish; she slid into a shadow to watch as Lena appeared, casually leading the pink one (Webby, she knew) and the hummingbird (Violet, she was fairly certain) to the clearing. Her teacher was nowhere to be found.

"Yeah, so here we are," she drawled, gesturing around them. "Magic training grounds. Not that much to look at, really, but whatever."

Magica should probably leave, before she *did* find out if Lena had innate shadow detecting abilities. Or the pink one threw a knife; she seemed prone to acts of violence. Something Magica would respect, under other circumstances.

On the other hand…

"Did Mr. Donald leave you any training exercises to do while he was away?" Violet asked, walking through the clearing with bright, curious eyes. That one would make a good apprentice, Magica thought; she had the right mind for it.

"A few little things, sure, but nothing big; he's worried about the *Phantom Blot,"* Lena whined, rolling her eyes, "and didn't want me doing anything bigger than a levitation spell unless he was here to watch. Like, come *on,* I've done bigger stuff than that!"

"But you did that stuff with the amulet, right?" Webby asked now, looking at Lena with a simpering face of worry, "You said that *he* said you needed to practice without it before you do anything big!"

"Ugghh," Lena groaned, flopping to the ground next to a large rock. "I didn't want to hear the right answer, Pink, I just want to complain for a bit."

"Oh! We can do that!"

Nauseating, really. Magica started to move away. Clearly this was more children being children than anything of interest, whining about rules and lessons and homework, and her curiosity about Lena's magic wasn't strong enough to listen to their disgusting friendship talk.

Though she was curious about the Phantom Blot. He'd been a rumor while she'd been still out, and after that she only got to overhear snippets when she could wrest her shadow free of the Dime prison, and it had hardly been a focus at the time. Some non-magical man with delusions of grandeur and some level of technology making his ideas function.

Now being free, she'd asked around when she'd heard he was out of prison. And the answers hadn't been comforting. Whatever his weapons were could rip every drop of magic out of a person *and* ruin their ability to make more? Permanently?

No, Magica was content never getting anywhere near something like that. The shock alone could be deadly, and without her magic what even *was* she?

Just a gorgeous, nearly immortal woman with Knowledge Arcane and no ability to utilize it.

She continued away while the girls chattered, clearly planning to simply 'hang out' instead of study; she could go pick some berries before dinner, maybe she could make jam and start stocking up their pantry properly.

Then she felt it.

Not that she could have said what *it* was. It felt like rot and decay, and it set her teeth on edge. She knew rot, fungus and decay ran hand in hand with shadows and darkness; this was not something natural. This was something *wrong.*

And it was close, but not recent. Whatever was giving off that revolting miasma had been near here, but was no longer. Perhaps in the last week or so?

She followed it, despite how unpleasant it felt. She couldn't seem to stop herself, in fact. Curiosity had often been her downfall, and this was no exception, it seemed. But what could have made this level of- she truly didn't know what she was encountering. No force on earth should feel so alien to it, something that truly did *not* belong here.

Further, further, whatever this was wasn't all that close to the clearing; she ignored the faint relief at that. There was no reason to be concerned by how close the clearing was to anything besides McDuck's Manor, so that she knew how far away help was if she ever confronted Duck in the clearing.

Just Duck. The oath she'd sworn still protected the children from her grudge with McDuck. Even if she went after Duck directly instead of McDuck, they were defended; she couldn't say she would ever bother with him without his relation to her greatest enemy. Which tied Lena's safety to the promise all over again.

An irritant, at best. She could deal with it another time, when Poe was at full strength. They could take out McDuck together, separating him from the family he leaned on so hard, and they would have their full revenge.

She found the source, finally. A rotting pond, water still and silent, devoid of all life, surrounded by a circle of dead land and deep cracks into the rocks nearby. The rot here was *odd,* something strange had happened here. An explosion, based on the shattered rocks around, but surely not a natural one. Natural things didn't leave scars on the land, not like these. Even a wildfire would feel natural, a loss that was normal if sad, leaving nutrients behind for the next generation to grow with. A cycle.

Magica floated closer, unwilling to touch the ground itself. The water was just. Dead. One would expect to see a vibrant amount of living creatures; insects and frogs and birds, eating each other or the sludge around the edges of the pool, cleaning it away so the water could flow and move to the next stage of life. But this wasn't some kind of plant life or decayed body; it was just a black rot, repelling every one of her senses, screaming a warning to go away.

The trail she'd noticed came here. Or ended here, perhaps. The pool had been the destination, either way, and then it wandered further into the woods, in the direction of Duckburg. Whatever had wandered here had carried the same rot with them; had they fallen into the pool? Or had they already been infested with it?

Magica slid away, slowly and then slightly faster, repulsed. Whatever this was, as far as she was concerned it was a McDuck problem, not hers. And she didn't quite want to know what kind of problem it was, so long as it stayed far away from her and Poe.

Bound in her Bones

“Now, you’re *certain* that this won’t cause any setbacks to your healing? We only just started in on the scar tissue, I don’t want this demonstration to do any further damage!” Merlin fretted, waving a hand like he wanted to cast some kind of diagnostic, but refraining. He’d been pretty hesitant to try anything new since the last incident. Which Donald appreciated, frankly. No more assumptions about his injuries would be great.

“Positive. Believe it or not, I really don’t *try* to hurt myself,” Donald grumbled, having heard this question a dozen times already. Eight from Merlin, one from a slightly hungover Mickey, and three from Flora, who seemed less worried and more exasperated at him.

“I find that hard to believe,” Yen Sid murmured, but it was more to himself; he’d been *particularly* reluctant to say anything overtly judgemental or even mildly aggressive since Sora started trying to light him on fire with his eyes. It seemed Donald had been forgiven in the wake of a bigger target for Sora’s anger.

“You are a bit accident prone,” Goofy added; Donald didn’t even try to deny it. Mostly because it was true, partially because Goofy was still his favorite person here right now and he couldn’t hold a grudge against him. *He* wasn’t giving him concerned/sad looks because Donald still didn’t want to get into the Blot thing. Or the volcano thing. Or, well- there was a lot.

“I will be *fine.* It’s just a quick jaunt to showcase a few spells for academic purposes, and to get some synthesis materials. We have more keyblade wielders than we need tagging along, José and Pancho have new weapons and also we will *be on the ocean.* I genuinely don’t think I could be safer,” he rattled off, gesturing vaguely at the different party members as he spoke.

“Perhaps I ought to come along to monitor you regardless…”

Donald shrugged. He didn’t really *care,* so long as nobody tried to stop him.

He felt clogged up, somehow, like a dam ready to burst, and had started to suspect he was still carrying *something* from the Realm of Darkness. Which didn’t bode well. Darkness festering in his soul *really* wasn’t something he wanted to be wondering about.

He’d tentatively floated that concern to the other Cabs, which was the only reason they weren’t protesting this little adventure.

Who knew, sharing a worry *had* helped. Would wonders never cease.

Merlin eventually *did* decide he would come along, though whether it was for medical concerns or academic curiosity wasn’t clear. Yen Sid made a face, but didn’t protest, nor did he offer to join them.

Typical. Donald didn’t think he liked leaving his Tower.

Donald led the way out of the Tower before anyone else could protest, and hopped onto the new Gummi ship. Apparently another thing the others had done while he was out was rebuild the ship to hold their entire expanded party. There were enough seats to house everyone and then some; he imagined the remaining seats were intended for Roxas and the mysterious last heart Sora carried.

How they would even solve *that* issue, Donald didn’t know.

He took over sailing. While he was happy to let Sora handle it lately, right now he wanted the distraction. And it meant everyone was trying to avoid distracting *him,* instead of continuing to ask questions or hover, though Panchito was all but sitting in his lap to watch with big, bright eyes.

“So all of those marks on the map are planets?” José asked, peering down. It was a new map, because everytime they came here the worlds seemed to shift around, though the warp points were usually in the same place relative to said world, so there was that.

“Worlds, technically. I’m not sure they count as planets,” he replied, looking out into the colorful cosmos around them. “Lots of old legends say they all used to be one world split into many, I’m pretty sure they’re just pieces of one big planet.”

“That would explain why they are so small!” Panchito chirped.

“And they change half the time!” Donald added. “We’ll visit a place, leave, and a few weeks later everything is different! And nobody there has any idea what we’re talking about!”

“How strange,” José murmured.

“Parts of worlds get lost in Darkness and vanish, sometimes,” Aqua explained, stepping up to sit in one of the copilot seats. “And sometimes they come back, if enough Light enters that world. By saving people and forming emotional connections, we strengthen those bonds and worlds are able to recover.”

José glanced at her with an interested expression.

“I thought I saw things, in the dark,” he said. “Mountains and castles, I thought, before they vanished again. Is that what those were?”

“Probably!” She confirmed. “They’re sleeping now, but someday we’ll be able to wake them all and bring them back to the Light.”

She looked wistful as she spoke; Donald wondered if there were worlds she was looking forward to recovering, or if she was just generally excited by the prospect of spreading Light to the Dark. Could really go either way.

“What do you mean, though? That our worlds are small?” Sora asked, leaning forward. “I thought our island was, when we were growing up, but you guys haven’t even been there! Twilight Town is pretty big!”

Donald glanced at him, pursing his beak thoughtfully.

“Well-”

“Uh, it is a pretty big town, Sora!” Mickey jumped in, looking a bit panicked. “Bigger than some of the other worlds we’ve seen, for sure! I think we’re seeing parts lost to darkness return already!”

Sora looked back at him, frowning.

“Is that why Atlantica has land now? And humans?” He asked, clearly letting himself be distracted. “That area was lost in darkness? Bet it was because of Ursula.”

“Could be; Maleficent’s castle was always losing and gaining parts back at random, I think she was keeping it from sinking into darkness entirely,” Riku told them, nodding absently. “We used to use portals to get around because the stairs wouldn’t always be there.”

“Huh. Weird.” Sora replied shortly, before his gaze turned back to Donald. “So your world is bigger?”

“Yes,” Donald agreed easily; Mickey might be concerned, but Donald was beyond that. He trusted Sora, and the kid had been very good at following the world order rule *without* coercive magic. He’d earned plenty of secrets. “Much. It’s-”

“Hey, Don, where are you taking us, anyway?”

“The Caribbean,” he answered, though he eyed Sora with a *look* he hoped the teenager would understand meant ‘later.’ “We need Soothing crystals.”

“And if you need an ocean,” Kairi chimed in with a grin, “no better place!”

They landed in Shipwreck Cove. partially because there were plenty of Heartless available in the area to get the crystals they needed. Mostly because Donald didn’t quite want to run into Jack or the other pirates and have to explain what they were up to.

He could be a *bit* nice to Mickey and his secrets.

He could sense the ocean long before they landed. It sang in his senses, and in the distance he could feel an awareness that didn't bode too well, but they did have a ship to escape with if needed.

Aqua and Ventus had never been here, it turned out. But they did have something interesting to say.

"It feels… familiar. Like Neverland!" Ventus exclaimed, looking around with interest. "Maybe they're connected somewhere? I'd like to see Peter again!"

"I agree, this feels very similar," Aqua said, breathing deeply. "Oh, I love that smell…"

"Hey, Donald! Maybe while we're here we can look for *ingredients!"* Sora shouted from a patch of seagrass, and Donald scowled, shaking a fist at him comically.

"I said it *one time-"*

"Once a world, maybe!"

Sora ran off before Donald could get going after him, laughing. Donald grumbled under his breath. So sue him, there was no *food* here, he was excited for some variety!

"Donald, you're sure you're alright?" Mickey asked quietly, once the others spread along the beach; Donald was watching for Heartless in every shadow. He didn't actually know how well Ven and Aqua would fare, yet. This gave them as good of an opportunity as any to see how they were healing up.

Xehanort wouldn't wait forever.

"Fine. Bit sore, but the potions are numbing it up pretty well," he answered.

Mickey looked doubtful.

"I don't like you being out here, with all of that… Maybe you should stay back?"

Donald turned to look at him, eyes narrowed.

"And that," he snarked, "is why I wouldn't have told you about 'all that' if I had the choice. I'm here, and a job needs to be done. I know my limits."

"Do you?"

"Did I collapse during a fight? Doing something stupid?" Donald retorted, watching his volume and figuring it was probably useless anyway, because he couldn't see where Axel or Kairi were and that meant they were probably eavesdropping, being the more subtle of the keyblade wielders. "Or did it happen *afterwards?* When I was actively going to get help?"

"Panchito and José were dragging you in by that point," Mickey argued, crossing his arms, tail thrashing.

“It wasn’t that *bad* until that point; I would have come in myself if it had been,” Donald snapped, rolling his eyes. Sure, maybe he would have taken longer, but he *would* have, and the last thing he wanted to deal with was someone assuming they knew his capabilities more than him. He got enough of *that* at home.

“Donald was the one that said he needed to go back to the Tower,” Panchito agreed easily, from far closer than Donald had expected. He’d figured they would go look out at the horizon, at least briefly, but he and José were just on the other side of the Gummi ship.

“Don’t lie and pretend you didn’t have to convince him, I know Donald too!” Mickey snapped and *wow* he was angry.

Donald glared back, temper flickering to life.

“I am not saying you don’t!” Panchito replied, not a hint of guile in his tone. “Only that you were not there for this conversation!”

“Donald did not need to be forced to get medical care,” José added, “He simply didn’t want it to be from Yen Sid.”

“You and Yen Sid! Since when do you have a problem with him anyway?!”

“Um, Mick, maybe we should talk about this later?” Goofy offered, walking up. “Only there’s some, uh, Heartless?”

So there were; the others had already armed up, in fact, Mickey and Donald were the last to notice.

It couldn’t be them being drawn in by the negativity, though. Of course not.

Donald sighed and drew his staff.

The fight was… less of a fight and more of a massacre. They had seven keyblade wielders, plus four talented warriors who didn’t have a magical destiny blade. Plus Merlin himself. This world didn’t even have an Organization member stirring up trouble on it anymore.

So the battle was more Donald taking a step back and watching Panchito and José fight.

To make sure their new weapons were functioning. Of course.

He actually hadn’t *meant* to sit back and watch, but the two were clearly aiming to keep Donald from casting a single spell. Whenever a Heartless got even close, there was Panchito’s whip, lit with fire and leaving a streak of light burning in his eyes. Or José’s saber slicing clean through them, glowing vaguely green.

They both kept *grinning* at him, and he could focus on the lackluster fight that didn't remotely need his efforts, *or* he could take the win and watch them instead.

He did keep an eye on the others, just to see how Aqua and Ventus were doing, but he didn’t need to be concerned; apparently a decade or so of inactivity hadn’t done either of them any harm in this arena.

And then there was one coming up behind Mickey, who was too busy watching *Donald* to watch his own back and Donald didn't even think before he had shot a fireball right into the thing's face; it evaporated as Mickey whipped around to stare at where it had been.

"Thanks, pal! You always have my back," he panted with a tentative smile, tail thrashing, and Donald rolled his eyes.

"Next time watch your *own* back first," he growled back. It did nothing to dim Mickey's smile; it actually made it *worse.*

Mickey always was good at knowing when Donald's temper was real and when it was something else. He was *also* a smug jerk about it.

"We can watch each other's!"

"What, not going to *order* me to stay out of it?" He snarked. Mickey winced, but his smile didn't waver.

"Alright, I deserve that. It's not… I've never seen you that hurt, Don," he said, smile going sad but never shrinking. "Can you blame me for being freaked out?"

Donald didn't know what 'that hurt' might entail, honestly. He'd been plenty injured before, and surely at least a few times in front of Mickey. He was fairly sure Mickey meant he'd never heard Donald *scream* before.

At least not in pain. Or, not *noticeably* in pain. Donald screamed fairly often; in surprise, in rage, in exasperation. And if he used that outburst of sound to cover up other feelings, well. Nobody needed to

know. Donald was loud, it was expected he'd make some noise. What kind of noise it was hardly mattered.

"Guess not," he said anyway, because if he said what he was really thinking Mickey would look even more distressed, and he was just… *done* with it all. With somehow being the cause of and cure to his friends' worries. If they were always going to come to him to solve them, subconsciously or not, why shouldn't he tweak things so they never had to come to him at all?

But no, that wasn't being *honest* with people. Was displaying his paranoia in a not-funny kind of way. It was *amusing* when he was worried about walking into obvious traps or being suspicious of strangers. It wasn't when that paranoia reared its head around people that he was supposed to trust.

"Can you show us the cool thing *now?"* Sora demanded, interrupting Donald's thoughts. "Come on, we're losing daylight!"

Realistically it would be cooler at high tide, but Donald shrugged that thought off, putting his staff away and walking towards the water with a huff and a sigh. Behind him, the whispering increased as everyone circled closer.

He *wanted* to do this, he reminded himself. Wanted to show off a bit, reconnect with his usual element while it wasn't corroded and dark. Maybe clean out the dark mood he'd been carrying.

The water flowed. His limbs ached. But he reached for it nevertheless. He was a sailor, after all. At the end of the day, his home was the Sea. No matter where it was, no matter where *he* was, it called to him, a siren song that would likely fill his lungs with saltwater someday.

The ocean loved greedily, and entirely. When it was done with him it would drag him down to the bottom and *keep* him there.

Someday.

But it wouldn't be today. Which was all Donald could ask for.

The water reached back.

He was on a ship. Feet on the deck, worn wood and sea salt under him, wind in his feathers. The horizon stretching endlessly on and on. The sky was clear, but it had the taste of rain; Donald's magic always tasted like rain. An incoming storm just over the horizon, always just one little push away to bring a maelstrom to the calm.

His feet were wet; he stepped forward, drawn in. Gulls screamed overhead, and in the sand around him he saw-

Crabs. Tiny little ones, the kind that looked like stones until they took out their claws. They skittered in the sand and crawled over each other in a wave.

He kept walking. The water didn't part for him; he walked on top of it, shifting from the waves and feeling the foam gather on his ankles. There was chatter near him, behind him, but he focused forward. He wasn't going far, anyway.

Out, out and out, and then-

-Hello, little sailor.-

The waves grew. The crabs skittered past him. His body ached to be with the water.

-Have you come to conquer me?-

Donald shook his head, and his tongue tasted like salt.

Only to visit. To travel, to explore, he insisted, and let the tide flow *through* him. He wasn't an obstacle, an island in the waves. He was a ship. He was *on* a ship.

It would be so easy to forget. But Donald was very good at keeping his feet on the deck.

-Not to take? You mortals are always taking.-

I do not take.

"Donald?" Someone called. "There's, uh-"

Something was coming to them. Something *big.*

Donald walked further out. The group was on shore, he thought. They should be safe, so long as they stayed on the beach.

He tried to say that, but he wasn't sure if it was his lungs that did it, or the roar of the waves. They were getting tall now. Taller than Donald. He'd gotten far from shore. The water was unyielding here, harsh and unending. His feet crested a wave, and the next one tossed him in the air. He laughed, and it was the crunch of sand in the tide.

With every breath, he felt better. Cleaner, like each gust of wind and wave of water was washing away the remaining Darkness, leaving him feeling light and *bright* in its wake. The storm in his mind receded slightly, no longer a threat, just a possibility.

The thing got closer. Donald could feel the shape of it now, moving in the waves, and his laughter got louder, pleased and excited, as the first tentacle crested the waves. Reaching. *Roaring.*

The kraken wasn't a placid creature, he knew. It was made to kill the ones that tried to cheat Davy Jones. Or would Will go by his own name, now that he was at the helm of the *Dutchman?* Would it be Turner that people would whisper about, murmur about the black spot and debts owed?

The kraken screamed again, and he could hear noise from the beach. He tapped the amulet, a calm, steady thrum.

I have this, the signal said, as much as he could say without words to express it. *I have this, it's fine. This is something I need to do.*

Because *this* ocean wasn't his. It wasn't the one he'd grown up on, the waves he'd played in and sailed on year after year. One didn't get to just *use* an element, You had to communicate, to bond.

To *earn* it.

The ocean didn't respect anyone who thought it could be controlled. Tamed. Leashed and tied down, bound in its bones and forced to behave. No, it would only accept someone willing to *fight*.

The kraken roared, and Calypso laughed, her voice a hurricane and her smile the gleam of the sun on the surf. This was *her* ocean; playful. Vengeful.

Violent.

Donald rose up on the next wave, and landed on the thrashing tentacles, sliding down the slick leathery flesh towards the gaping maw, and flung himself towards its glaring eye.

The Caballeros sword was in his hands, and he *laughed*.

He didn't kill the kraken, of course. The kraken wasn't a threat, it was simply a creature in the environment, enjoying its new freedom and old friend, Calypso sending soothing ripples along its' sides as Donald was flung here and there like a bobble.

He let it, tapping it with the flat of the blade and fighting tooth and nail to keep from drowning. It was probably the most fun fight he'd been in in *decades*.

Sure, he could die. But he wouldn't. He knew he wouldn't. Nobody else was in danger, nothing was going wrong. There was nothing else he needed to pay attention to in this moment. Just him, a creature that he would have to *try* to hurt, which meant he could let loose and just brawl with no regard for anything.

Deep, deep beneath them, in a place far below even the darkest of trenches, the oily waves shifted. They were blocked off, for now. But he could feel them. They wanted to do what water always wanted to do.

Flow.

The barriers between worlds were so very, very thin.

Occasionally, a flicker of warmth crossed his skin. A flit of a breeze. The amulet glowed and pulsed, and he hoped the show was good on shore but frankly he was more invested in the grinning eyes that had slowly emerged into the gloom of a wave's shadow. She grinned at him, a tempest and a monster, too eldritch to be a goddess and too worshipped to be anything else.

-*In another life, you might have been mine.*- She whispered in the cries of the birds and the shifting water. Donald smiled back at her, all teeth and grit.

In another life, he agreed, and said nothing more. Don't make promises you couldn't keep. Not to a being more than happy to hold you to them.

-*Who are the ones that you do carry?*- She asked now, head tilting this way and that, hair swirling in the dark waves like foam in the tide.

Adventure. And heroes.

-And the ones in your soul?-

Wind, he said, and the breeze rustled his feathers, *wind and the sun.*

She smiled, now, rows of teeth like a shark.

-Good. They will not fail you. Not as mortals do. They will guide you straight and true, along the endless horizon.-

He returned to shore. The ship docked, his feet hit the sand, and Sora tackled him back into the drink with a shriek.

“That was so cool how did you do that can you teach me how to walk on water I didn’t know you could walk on water did you get to pet the kraken I want to pet it-”

Donald laughed, letting his head fall back into the water for a moment before he hauled them both out.

“Yes, I did, it’s leathery and weird, and next time we’re out on the open water, *maybe.* I don’t know if it’ll come this far inland without a target, and I don’t want to give it one, alright?”

“Come *on,* and was that Calypso? Her little crabs were everywhere-”

“Gods tend to notice people messing with their elements. She was curious,” he explained, and the others had caught up now, crowding

but letting Sora keep the closest part.

Panchito caught his eye and *winked,* José giving him eyes from below his bangs, which promised an interesting problem for later; was there a single place where they could get privacy…?

“You just casually talking with goddesses now, Don?” Goofy laughed, ruffling his hair; his hat was… somewhere. He’d have to find it. Or get a new one.

“I know at least three back home, why would that be shocking?” He huffed.

“Alright, that was cool and all, but I think I understand your whole elemental thing even *less* now,” Axel grumbled. He’d been in a mood since their arrival. Donald thought it might be the fact that Ventus looked *just* like Roxas and it was probably a bit off-putting. But who knew, maybe it was the full length leather jacket he was wearing. On the beach.

Hard to say.

“Elements are more particular about who wields them,” he explained, feeling the phantom brush of Calypso’s fingers against his neck. “You have to get permission.”

“By fighting a kraken?”

“What else would she want me to do?” He asked, and nobody had a response to that.

“Well, that was certainly informative! I do wish I’d been able to get a closer look, but I didn’t think it wise to interrupt,” Merlin said cheerfully, a scroll of scribbled notes in his hands. “Truly fascinating, that power… much stronger, but it seems more volatile…”

“It doesn’t like doing certain things,” Donald told him absently, wringing out his shirt. “Certain spells don’t work as well this way; I know forged magic has an easier time overcoming elemental incompatibility…”

“Oh, indeed! I did wonder- what would you say is the most difficult thing to do with this power source?”

“Healing,” Donald joked, then laughed when Sora twisted to stare at him, shocked. “No, not really, I’m just *personally* shit at it- it’s not great for building anything, water's not much for stability, hell of a hassle to do any kind of architecture that way…”

Merlin nodded, writing frantically, and Donald settled into the sand to talk; he knew this type. He wouldn’t be moving anytime soon.

And he didn’t, but that was fine. The others wandered, finding more crystals and relaxing in the sand, and Donald was subtly encouraged to stay still and enjoy the waves.

It was a good day. A restful day on the beach, collecting crystals to make an artificial magic organ and watching Mickey try to avoid answering questions about their world by throwing Donald under the bus with his weird life story. Apparently *that* was weird enough to not really count as a secret.

It wasn't like it told them much about their world; Donald's life wasn't exactly standard.

A good day. He hoped the joy would last them to the next one.

Tomorrow they would fight Xehanort and the new Organization XIII.

The Keyblade Graveyard

They stood in the Keyblade Graveyard.

The battle. No more stalling, no more seeking out other people for their side. They were here, on a dead, dry planet, in a graveyard of broken Keyblades.

Gods there were so many broken blades. Thousands, hundreds of thousands. Broken and rusting in a giant desert landscape. The last remnants of the mythic Keyblade War, and he didn't like that there hadn't been any *Heartless* before Ansem. Barely a generation of the monsters, and these blades predated them all by millennia.

What had these blades fought? How many of them had belonged to children? Pure of heart, desperate to do good, guided by those older and wiser into this massacre? How many had known what kinds of threats they'd really be facing here?

It was all he could think about, as they landed. The blades. The children that had held them.

The children he was guiding to the same battlefield today, praying for a different fate. He swore he could feel their desperation and fear, echoing in each quiet footstep.

Keyblades were part of their wielders' souls. It didn't bode well that they were still *here,* not dissolved away with the bodies of the ones that they belonged to. The ground itself, dry and bare and dead, was saturated with unseen blood.

This place deserved peace. Not to be a place of war once again.

But first, they had to defeat Organization XIII. The ones that had brought this fight to this tomb; then they could worry about laying these ghosts back to rest.

Fighting was an instinct; he had half a dozen staves in his inventory ready to go when he inevitably blew through the first one, Goofy was carrying more Potions than they'd probably use in a decade, and everyone was watching for *everyone,* nobody was going to fight alone. Sora got stuck alone enough in these damned battles, but here and now? Xehanort needed Keyblade wielders to fight. Not Donald, not Goofy. So as long as the wielders stuck together, they should be able to keep anyone from getting separated.

He hoped. He prayed, though to what god he didn't know. He didn't know who might answer. Who might even be listening.

The kids and young people ran ahead, blades held high, and he couldn't trust hope and prayers, he needed to *be* there. To make sure they would all survive. That was all he could do. It was all he had to do; the fate of the world rested on them, but he could carry them to that fate.

Panchito and José had stayed behind. He couldn't decide if it was better or worse that way. Queen Ginny could easily get them home, if-

If.

But he didn't like that they weren't with him. That they wanted to be with him, and weren't. Even if they had proposed staying behind in the first place, he still couldn't decide if he would have preferred having them near him, allies that would be there for *him,* not this

war.

Or if he preferred knowing their child wouldn't be orphaned, should the worst come to pass.

Yen Sid had agreed it would be better for them to stay behind, though he'd had more pragmatic concerns. This wasn't an enemy to face while so un-used to Heartless battles. Had they had more time, maybe. Maybe they could have been there, at his back and side, them against the world again. But not today. Not this battle.

Donald needed to be a shield today, someone to take the blows so the others could keep moving. He couldn't afford another distraction, any split in his duties; the thought of having to choose between the kids and his partners made his soul ache.

He didn't like agreeing with Yen Sid, though, even if they had different reasons why they'd come to the same conclusion. It made his feathers itch.

Panchito had decided since they weren't going, he would be helping the Moogles and Merlin build the prototype magic crystal, while José was happily learning how to make more Potions. He'd decided that they should try to recreate them at home, something Donald hadn't once thought to try; none of the ingredients grew back home, but José was certain the recipes could be re-written for local resources.

Donald was reminded, fiercely, how clever and creative his partners were. The thought of it kept him focused; protect the children, and get home to his family, so he could keep watching and admiring them.

He kept fighting. This planet felt dead, in a way that no others had. The world was dry, and dusty, the life on it obliterated by the battle

that had fallen out of memory in this place, leaving only broken weapons and a giant blank 'X' in the center of the battlefield. It felt wrong, not in the way a desert felt strange to him, too dry and barren to be familiar, but in the way a blighted landscape felt wrong. The knowledge of something missing haunting the nothing that was.

There should be *something* here. Plants. Formations in the stone that weren't the same dusty brown. *Something* besides the dead.

Why did this place exist? All the other worlds they'd come across still held life, and hope, and light. They each guarded a world's heart with their joy and energy. There was nothing here. Just a dusty dry desert that didn't resemble any living desert Donald had ever been in.

They hadn't actually started fighting the new Organization Thirteen yet, just the small fry, he needed to keep his focus and energy on getting through this part first-

And then, Aqua and Ventus were running, not into another fight but towards a man that looked terribly familiar, and yet-

Could one thing go right, this time? Could that actually be…?

"Terra!"

Was it? Donald had his doubts. Xehanort had possessed him for years now, he wouldn't release him that easily, would he? He needed *seven* lights, and they had that already; giving them help would be a strange choice. But Xehanort only had twelve members that they'd confirmed.

Unless.

Ventus ran forward, hope in every movement. They all trailed after him.

Unless this was a trick. A cruel, unnecessary, painful trick, using the face of someone they missed so desperately to try to force them to lower their guard.

Aqua was already way ahead of his thoughts, tugging Ventus back and begging for the man to let their friend go. She looked distraught. She looked *furious.*

They were still too far away; Donald ran, but they were all so much taller than he was here, and he and Mickey quickly fell behind the crowd-

There was a moment where Donald thought maybe he was wrong, that he was too paranoid and suspicious, and then, too fast to see, too fast to *react,* Terra was there, just in front of Ventus, the kid too surprised (or maybe too hopeful that they were wrong) to move, everything was too fast and Donald couldn't follow it fast enough-

-Ventus struck in the chest, falling to the side, unmoving-

-Aqua screaming-

-Sora leaping forward, before being caught in an orb of darkness that knocked him to the ground-

-Axel being *flung* through rocks and dust, faltering too far away to see-

Terra (or was it just Xehanort?) turned to look at Kairi, smirking at her glare, and Sora was already running, desperate to block the incoming blow, Mickey screamed Sora's name but they were all still too far away-

Well. Not everyone. Goofy was *there,* shield in hand and standing in front of the teenagers, Donald right behind; the blow knocked him off of his feet, but it threw Xehanort into the air, startled and off-balance, and-

Donald knew his staff wouldn't survive this. It was built for basics, and this wouldn't be that.

So he reached. Not to the sea, there was no water here and he didn't know he could get his mind far enough in time.

But there was something else.

Something larger. Stronger.

Older.

What was the sky but an ocean of stars?

He *reached.*

The stars roared in answer.

“ ***Zettaflare!”***

The spell didn’t so much go through him as *blast* through his soul, too large for such a small space. It ripped, it tore, it tried to take him with it, but Donald’s feet held firm. He was seated at the helm of the ship, the stars around him, and he would not falter.

Oh, but it *tried,* it caught at the edges of his mind and body, trying to take him *with* it as it flashed its way through, sparking with excitement. It was eager to **Become.**

The spell made it out, the light somehow dark and red and *angry;* it would not miss. It was as determined as its caster to find its target.

Find, and destroy.

A *Flare* spell could be many things. The light in the darkness, the spark for a pleasant fire.

A *zetta* spell wasn’t a campfire or the warmth of a hearth. It wasn’t the life and light of the sun.

It was far, far larger, and it rocked the foundation of the planet they stood on, so small in the infinite cosmos, a pebble in the seas of gravity and stars. It left his hands, and they were… empty. Clutching. He was suddenly so very small, and cold, and his mouth tasted of burnt sugar.

The enemy was gone, and the sky beyond light, but he could feel the

fire passing by, a comet that wouldn't be stopped for eons, a beacon that would light the skies of worlds far beyond the tiny places they'd visited.

The stars shifted. The sky-sea rippled, and it felt *awakened.*

The staff fell from his hands, shattered and dead, and he fell.

He fell, and fell, and fell.

And something reached out to catch him.

He was in the sea, but it was *wrong.* It was scattered and split and at the bottom sat nothing but *rot.*

He could remove it. Put the dark where the dark belonged and let the water flow freely. He should do it. It was Necessary. The sea became the rain became the river became the sea. The water wanted to be whole. To move as one, to follow craigs in rock and streams in the air. It didn't like to be kept apart. These little walls, membranes that were only paper-thin keeping it apart.

He reached.

He *pressed.*

Water flowed free. Gushing, *rushing,* finally freed of millennia of

imprisonment.

The rot wanted to go, too. To flow, to spread. To use the moving water to spread its infection, to hide in the shallows and grab unsuspecting creatures. But it was heavy, dense, and couldn't rise to the surface. It settled, in the low places, the dark hollows under the waves, under the trenches and caverns. Waiting for an opportunity, a storm or a rage to summon it.

He didn't need to wait. He took it in his hands, large, so very large, they held the slimy oily dark and gripped it in cupped palms.

He forced it *up*.

Up and up and up, where it tried to spread-

But above the water, there was *Light*.

And it writhed, screamed, thrashed. Burned. And slowly, slowly, faded away.

He held it there until there was nothing left in his hands. No remainder of the dark in the flowing water he held.

And he dove back down.

There was nothing else to be done. The water must flow freely, and the pollution must be removed.

May you always have the strength of heart, to do what must be done.

He pulled the rot into the Light.

Things got… strange, after that. He remembered floating.

Sleeping?

Dreaming?

Sora calling for him, desperate. Afraid. Struggling to respond, but-

That was one of his kids. He had to respond.

He woke. They stood in the Keyblade Graveyard. They all swore to fight to the end, no matter what. To answer if Sora called them for help. It felt poignant, like there was a reason he might need to hear it, but Donald's mind refused to recall *why*.

They ran. They fought. A break in the chaos, and-

"Terra!"

A man stood in front of them. Terra? No. His face was cold. This

wasn't a friend.

-Hadn't he done this?-

The false Terra moved to strike Ventus. The stars beckoned, but he held back, waiting, waiting-

And this time (wasn't this the first time?) a set of armor arrived to parry the first blow. Possessed, living armor. The Lingering Will. A set of moving parts that had once belonged to…

"Terra?" Aqua asked, staring at the blank mask, and she was desperate hope personified, a prayer to the universe that this time, this time she would be right.

The armor didn't respond. Donald didn't know if it even could. It only had one focus, and that was Xehanort.

It quickly drove Xehanort off, further into the distance, far and away from their group. A problem, certainly, but one for another time.

Around them, Heartless began to swirl, a maelstrom of bleeding darkness and malevolent yellow eyes. It pulled the smaller ones in, willing or not, and grew until it blotted out the skies. The wielders shuddered, like they remembered-

But had they faced this before?

"I'll stop it!"

Sora was running directly at it, a tiny, impossibly small figure against the storm. Of course he was. Why couldn't just *one* person Donald cared about run *away* from the fight, or stay and work together, why-

Sora stopped, just shy of the storm. Like he'd seen something.

A flash of light, and a whisper of righteousness made real, the rasp of souls running across the air, and the keyblades around them began to rise.

Hundreds, thousands of broken and beaten blades, their owners long dead and defeated, and yet not completely gone, not yet, flew up and towards the storm of Darkness, glowing not with magic but pure *Light,* and Sora leapt to join it, a beacon in the Dark.

Sometimes. Sometimes Donald could understand why he'd been Chosen. Sometimes he understood why it had to be a child, *this* child, that had to fight against the rising dark. His heart practically glowed with the power needed to do what had to be done.

The Light flared, blinding and warming, and when it was gone so too was the maelstrom.

The blades dissolved, purpose completed, and the desert felt lighter. A graveyard it remained, but no longer a haunted one. The spirits around them rested.

Another Organization member, Riku from the past (or was it the Riku

clone?), another army of Darkness and Heartless, circling and trapping them against the cliffs. There were so many Heartless, the ground writhed with their shadows and bleeding dark; they couldn't risk wasting their strength, but if they became trapped here, before they reached their enemy, it would all be for nothing.

Nothing, and that wasn't acceptable.

Aqua offered to try and open a path through the mass, saying she would catch up to them when she could. Ventus and Kairi arguing immediately that she couldn't do it alone, Axel growling they shouldn't split up-

And then Yen Sid, glowing with light and magic, appeared out of the gloom with a scowl, and the path was opened, magic blasting everything within reach.

Some part of Donald was grateful. Some part of him resented he'd *taken* so long.

Yen Sid snarled at them all to go, to take the opening to get to the next fight. He would hold them off.

Two smaller figures had appeared with him, stepping from the light with weapons held aloft.

Relief. And fear, and dread, but more than any of it- relief. A bone-deep gratitude.

Panchito grinned at him, and he held not his whip, but his spear, black obsidian glowing red. José held aloft his own sword, a fierce

green blade, and they settled against his sides. Just close enough for him to feel their combined body heat, warming his own naturally cool skin. He breathed.

“What happened to staying back?” He murmured.

“You looked like you needed the help,” Panchito replied. They both nodded, then stiffened.

“Donald,” José whispered, eyes going briefly wide and concerned. “What did you *do?”*

“I- “ He started, but he couldn’t *remember* . “I don’t know?”

There had been stars, and light, and fire. Water, flowing and free. And then darkness. But had it happened?

“Donald?”

“Later!” He hissed, and they turned to face the rest of their allies.

Mickey argued. The others did too, because of course they did. They were young, passionate heroes. They didn’t leave their own behind.

Seven lights. Thirteen darknesses. Despite Donald’s personal opinions on Yen Sid, on Sora and the kids and young people that were fighting this war, he knew where he was needed.

He wasn't the hero of this story. He was the *shield.*

He and Goofy fell behind the aging Master in unison, weapons at the ready, and told the Chosen ones, the Keyblade wielders meant to save the worlds from being eaten away and destroyed by a darkness that wasn't the absence of light but the absence of *anything,* a black hole made aware and desperate to consume, to go.

His partners stepped with him, never a moment of hesitation. Their presence behind him was a welcome weight against his spine, a protection and a support that he always wanted but could never afford to need.

Sora hesitated. It warmed Donald somewhere in the depths of his heart, but that couldn't be the focus right now. He had a job to do. To stem the tide, to hold the line. They wouldn't allow their heroes to be caught from behind.

May you always have the strength of heart to do what must be done.

The path closed. The Heartless swarmed. His allies were there, and he only needed to focus on one thing.

Hold.

The.

Line.

Like Magnets or the Tide

The fear washed away, leaving nothing but determination. Donald could trust these two, he knew them like the back of his hand. He knew where Panchito would leap, where José would dodge. How one would guard his back if he needed to breathe, would follow if he leapt in. They knew when he was falling back and could guard the flank, and he knew when one of them would charge so he could do the same.

Seamless. No questions on where they were going.

Fire and wind swirled around them, their combined forces blasting Heartless back by the dozen, while Yen Sid's glowing keyblade (Donald had *so* many questions about that!) whirled like a maelstrom of Light. Goofy kept at his side, clearly trusting that Donald and the Cabs could handle themselves.

They fought. It seemed to be an endless horde.

Donald wasn't tiring, but he worried the others might. His heal spells weren't good for much in the way of actual *healing,* but they could pack a punch of energy if he wanted them to.

And he did.

" Feels like I just got a second wind!" José laughed, flinging himself back with a vengeance and glowing green whirls of air buffeting the Heartless around him. His feet had barely touched the ground once.

Goofy let out a holler and spun his shield into another group, bursting the lot of them into glowing hearts and a puff of black goop.

“My turn!” Panchito yelled, though Donald didn’t think he remotely needed *energy,* but he was brimming with magic and nowhere to spend it, so he sent one to him as well.

.. that backflip hadn’t been *necessary,* but it had been very effective.

Briefly, Donald fell back to back with Yen Sid, watching the others while he ensured their position hadn’t shifted. They needed to keep this army off of the Keyblade wielders while they dealt with the Organization members; they couldn’t afford to lose ground to gain kills.

“Your staff is nearly drained,” Yen Sid warned, breathing heavily, and Donald paused, glancing down at it.

… had be been *using* it? As a power source? Certainly he was channeling spells through it, but…

In his mind, buried deep under the battle and his fears and the threat of everyone dying while they were here trying to protect their flank-

-Little sailor. Your hands reach far, don’t they?-

Calypso chuckled in his mind, but it wasn’t threatening. Warm, maybe.

As warm as the sea could be. Always with the threat of a chill, given the right incentive.

-You've done me a favor. I'll keep your feet on the decks.-

He stood on a ship, but the ship was so far away, miles and light years and eons- but he stood tall and firm. Calypso's hand reached across the brink, fingers trailing lightly on his shoulders, and where he might have wavered alone, here there was no struggle.

"Huh," he said to all of *that,* and decided fuck it all. If he'd done what he was worried he'd done, there was no turning back. Might as well turn the tide.

He put the staff away, ignoring Yen Sid's concerned tone, and stepped forward.

Want to spread a little chaos? He asked, water rising in him like a typhoon, and Panchito's head whipped around with a grin that was all sunburns and hazy distant mirages. The breeze rustled his feathers.

And in his mind, a laugh like the crash of thunder.

-Oh I think I like *you.-*

José appeared at his side, one hand raised, eyes beginning to glow. He smiled, fierce and bright, and together they raised the storm.

There was no water on this world. But it hardly *mattered* when all the worlds were connected, in a far more literal way than by hearts and

emotional connections. They were *one,* one ocean flowing beneath and around, separated no longer and happy to fill in the gaps and bridge the spaces between. As soon as Donald reached out, and Calypso reached *back,* a new river formed, and the plain they stood in flooded with a gushing tidal wave that with José he turned into a hurricane.

Yen Sid let out a surprised shout; Donald treasured that noise for a moment, before he focused on the task at hand.

They rose, riding the edges of the storm to force the Heartless into the cliffs, where they were slammed into the rocks or caught in the storm. Panchito slid around one edge, a blazing flare of light that blocked one exit, while Goofy and Yen Sid moved to the other side.

Yen Sid stared up at them with mild surprise, which Donald thought was probably something like heart-stopping shock on anyone else. He only seemed to be fighting out of habit, because his eyes were pinned to the controlled thrashing storm next to him.

But while it was certainly funny, and gratifying, he had to focus. Calypso was only keeping *him* grounded, and she may very well decide she was done. He needed to focus on the task at hand.

Well. Three tasks.

Keep the Heartless from slipping past.

Make sure José didn’t lose himself to the winds he was carrying so well; just because he was stable now didn't mean it would last forever. It was easy to lose focus on yourself in the heat of the moment. Donald gripped his hand tight, and José squeezed back.

And find somewhere to connect the ocean to this place; it may not have a beach, but it was a world. And worlds needed water.

The castoff drops soaked into the sand. Some evaporated in the heat, going straight back into the maelstrom they were smashing into the cliffs, but others made their way down.

Down past the top layers of sand and dust, down to the harder bedrock. It found small fissures and caverns that had once held underground rivers and, leaving their salt behind on the rocks and ground, began to slowly, slowly, fill those places up.

Elsewhere, in the rising heat of the day, some of the evaporating water didn't make it high enough to join, or spread too far to be caught in the breeze, and settled in small batches of wispy fog and in thin, scraggly clouds.

Somewhere, later, a flash flood would eventually begin, rushing water over sand rapidly turning to mud. Somewhere, long forgotten plant seeds and desperate, hopeful roots would take their first drink in millennia, and tiny movements of growth would spread under the ground.

This was not where Donald and José were. It was not where Panchito's blaze made the air humid and sticky, flames reaching tentative fingers up and around the breeze until there was a cyclone of flames where he stood, and any Heartless trying to flee that direction were flung into either the water or the fire without mercy.

Here the ground was wet but the water was running off as fast as it landed, rushing rivers and streams that covered the dead land with cool blue waters instead, and here the Heartless were a bit more immediately distracting, and there was no time to ponder what kind of life may have once been on this battle field.

Donald and José held the storm, and water spread, and Calypso laughed, fingers trailing across the rocks.

He wondered if Poseidon existed here; whether in Olympus or elsewhere. If he would make an appearance at some point, demanding some level of control over what they were doing, or protest Donald's use of their shared element. If there were territories of the gods, or if they were merely aspects of each other.

He knew the answer at *home,* but home wasn't a piecemeal place of small communities and towns floating alone in an enormous void of space, and home had had plenty of time for the varying deities and forces of nature to find a balance with each other.

He also wondered if Triton would kill him if he showed up now; seemed he couldn't help breaking the world boundaries the second he was released from his orders not to do so. He might need to avoid Atlantica for a while.

Pity. Ariel might like getting to explore new seas.

Yen Sid was many things, and apparently one of them was old. He couldn't continue the fight when the Heartless were at last repelled.

"The others will still need aid, but I am not capable of offering it. It appears to fall to you," he said, looking at them all with his deep gaze. Donald stared back, eyes slightly narrowed. His tone was odd. It couldn't be respect. But it was something close.

“Another time, I might ask what exactly you have done here,” he continued, looking around at the soaking wet landscape. Half the water had evaporated already, leaving the air muggy. The rest sat in shining puddles that threatened to join the air at any moment; Donald was eager to get away before that happened.

He shrugged.

“Hopefully by then I’ll have an answer,” he replied, and he felt Calypso’s laughter as she finally faded from his mind. He wondered if she considered them even now. “Elemental magic’s more of an instinctive thing.”

Yen Sid looked troubled by that, but whatever he was thinking, he thankfully didn’t say. Goofy laughed.

“Gawrsh, Donald, you sure are full of surprises lately!”

He didn’t sound annoyed, or even worried. Just amused.

Donald felt guilty anyway. He really owed Goofy for all of this; of everyone involved he’d signed up for the least of the chaos Donald was causing lately.

He owed him something. A night out? Heartfelt thank you card? Goofy would probably accept a *hug,* honestly, but Donald was feeling generous with the time he certainly wouldn’t have when they got back home.

Yen Sid bid them luck, and left, apparently deciding that they didn’t have time to linger and discuss theoretical magics or war strategies.

They ran, and the desert shifted, revealed ruins, tall stone buildings covered in sand and dirt, carvings lost to time.

"I wonder what this place looked like, in its heyday," José murmured, as they ran towards the growing light of the giant heart-shaped Moon.

Kingdom Hearts. Donald was getting sick of seeing the damned thing, and everything that came with it. Nobody who sought it out was doing it for good reasons.

The thing looked sickly. Like it shouldn't be there.

"Alive," he replied absently.

"Wonder why Master Yen Sid can just teleport, but didn't get us closer," Goofy mused, and Donald choked on a laugh.

"I think he got too tired!" He managed to snort out. "Good thing us young folks are ready for the next round!"

So saying, he sent them all another Heal. The thing about fighting Heartless was that they weren't just physically demanding, they were emotionally exhausting. You didn't notice the latter until later, when you just wanted to lie in a dark room and talk to nobody for *days,* but it was just as draining as the fight itself.

"Dunno why you say you're a bad Healer, Don, those always hit nice!" Goofy added with a pleased stretch, adjusting his shield to sit better on his arm.

“Ask me that again when you break your *leg* and the best I can offer you is the magic version of an energy drink.”

They continued on, and eventually found the others. Well, some.

And some unexpected new arrivals.

“Ah, Roxas!” Donald shouted, half joy and half surprise. “And, uh…?”

There was a girl there. She looked like Kairi, if Kairi had black hair, but something about her was so like *Sora* he was momentarily baffled. She smiled at them. Her face was wet with recent tears, but she was smiling. Axel looked like she and Roxas held the moon and the stars in the sky in their hands.

“Donald, Goofy!” She called back, waving. “Oh, it’s so nice to meet you for real!”

For real…?

“I’m Xion. Um, the last heart Sora was holding,” she explained, and then rubbed the back of her neck. The gesture was so *familiar,* and he could abruptly see Sora’s sheepish grin in her face. “The whole story is a bit long, but-”

“Welcome back,” he said, and she beamed like the sun. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Sora went ahead,” she explained, gesturing, and they started walking.

“We needed a breather, Axel and I did. Roxas is fine, though, he was *late* !”

She jostled him with an elbow as she spoke. He grinned back, and Axel’s face…

Donald imagined it looked an awful lot like his own, when he’d first seen Della back from the Moon.

“Hey, don’t blame me! I needed to find an entire body to work with first!” He insisted, laughing. He glanced at Panchito and José, who were trailing behind and watching everyone with curiosity. “Nice to meet you guys for real, too! You know, Sora’s super jealous of you two?”

“Of us?” Panchito exclaimed.

“He likes having all of Donald’s attention!” Roxas laughed. He seemed ecstatic to be able to laugh, like each one was a new experience.

Donald hoped they had plenty of ice cream on the ship. These kids were all going to need it, once the adrenaline died down.

The next trio they found was already moving towards the next battle.

“He real this time?” Donald called, looking at Terra(?) suspiciously. Aqua nodded, still clearly in shock about it herself.

“We saw him purge the darkness away. It’s him this time!”

He… was going to trust her. Seemed like these possessed people couldn't resist the urge to gloat for long anyway; if he'd lasted this long, he was probably legit.

"Sora's just up ahead!"

So he was. And so was another imposing gateway, into another dark foreboding world, to face another enemy bent on destroying reality itself.

Well. Actually, it was just Xehanort again. Guy needed a hobby. Maybe he'd like chess.

Sora walked forward to face the threat, leaving the others behind to fight off the darkness of the world-ending glowing Kingdom Hearts, the heart in the sky an almost unfathomable weight on the horizon.

Donald and Goofy fell into step behind him. After a brief whispered debate, José and Panchito did not. This part, this wasn't their fight. And

Once more into the breach. May it be the last.

The Ladder In The Sky

Donald sat in bed, writing. He'd been put on bedrest after the battle, forcefully; the others citing he was still supposed to be being treated for his original injuries. Merlin in particular was pushy about it. He was fairly sure they just didn't want him up and moving to pace.

Or search.

Sora was gone. He'd done- Donald didn't really know. Barely understood it. The Power of Waking was a Keyblade wielder thing, a way to bring worlds lost in the darkness back through the bonds between people. Use your connection to a person to find *their* connection to a place. But Sora had gone to find them all instead. He'd had the place, he needed the person. Apparently doing the *opposite* of the usual method launched you out of this world, and into- somewhere.

Donald couldn't say he was surprised the kid had chosen to use it anyway. To pull them all back from the razor edge.

Panchito and José hadn't taken that news well. That they'd been that close to… Well. They were the strictest about keeping him in bed.

Xehanort was gone. Dead gone and dusted, everyone was certain of it. They'd watched his soul fly off into the sky with his old friend, at peace at last, and Donald- hated him. Why did *he* get that damned happy ending when Sora was still trapped somewhere?

Trapped, or-

It didn't matter. Death was only as permanent as the soul wanted it to be, and Sora had sworn he'd return. He'd be back. In the meantime, everyone was- well, not calm. Quiet, certainly. Resting. The threat was neutralized. Everyone was healing, or enjoying having a body again, or already searching.

Ventus, Terra and Aqua were searching the Realm of Darkness, Riku trying to solve some riddle he'd been given in his dreams. The others were trying to finish cleaning up the damaged worlds, re-establish Light and safe passages lost to darkness, and Donald-

He sat in his damned bed, while José and Panchito watched him severely, and he wrote.

He told them he was just trying to get his thoughts out. He rested best when he had a project to work on, something to distract him from the itching feeling of healing. Turned out healing old magic scars itched *inside,* and anything to keep his mind busy was welcome.

They'd decided to stay at Disney Castle; Donald was grateful that they were at the castle instead of Yen Sid's Tower, because the castle had beds. And distance from the other residents.

It meant that when he said he wanted to be alone, people had somewhere else to *go.* He knew that Mickey and Goofy had been helping in the search, when they had time. José and Panchito were trying not to leave him alone for too long, but they were exploring the castle, reading the history of the summons.

Of the heroes from before Donald's time. The Kings, the Knights and Mages, Queens and Ladies. How Disney operated as the guard against the dark, the first to call in a King and a court to protect the borders, to investigate or protect or attack, as the situation required.

He squinted down at the paper in his hands, growled, and lit it on fire, before grabbing another blank sheet and starting over. No, no, this one wouldn't work; the distance limitation would be an issue. This was the kind of thing he'd only get one chance at, before someone tried to stop him.

He started a new one. The circle, protection shields for while the spell was active. Then the inner circle, and there he stopped. Considered. He'd started using the same base he'd used before, but it by necessity needed some kind of limitation or it would spiral out endlessly until the task was done.

If he only had one shot at this before someone stopped him, he should take that into consideration.

It wasn't power he was short on. It was time.

"Would you like to play some music?" José asked him, lounging on the bed next to Donald's knees. "I think it would do you some good to have some noise!"

Donald shook his head.

"I'd rather just relax," he admitted, which felt so *wrong,* but it was true. The idea of playing anything made his head ache. Made his chest hurt.

He'd promised to play Sora something, hadn't he? He hadn't been able to with the World Order spell in place, and then they'd been so busy,

but he'd at least promised?

"We can do that," José agreed easily. He didn't push. None of them did.

- he'd been holding Sora's hand when he vanished, nobody said a word when Donald started screaming -

"Do you want to hear about what Panchito and I have been doing around the castle?" He asked after a moment. Donald didn't answer. José started talking anyway.

Donald let the words wash over him.

He was glad they were having fun. Or at least weren't suffering. Got to see the castle and the surrounding city, something new and exciting. They'd mentioned maybe visiting Radiant Gardens when Donald was well enough to travel.

He was fine *now.* The scarring wasn't bad, he didn't understand why they were so pushy about it.

"Is your chest hurting again?" José asked, sitting up to look at him.

"What?"

"You were rubbing your chest again."

Oh. He was. Donald let his hands drop, but José was already getting up.

“I will get your next Potion, and be right back!” He called, and was gone before Donald could-

What? Call him back? Beg to not be alone with his thoughts?

Wasn’t that what he was asking them to do? Leave him alone? Wasn’t that what he implied everytime he didn’t respond to something, every time he didn’t want to play some music, or go for a walk around the same hallways again? Wasn’t that him trying to be alone?

Donald shook his head. It wasn’t that he wanted that, it was that he couldn’t-

Couldn’t-

He couldn’t bring himself to enjoy their company. He was safe and sound, lying around in bed drinking Potions and getting Healing spells blasted at him while Sora was lost somewhere out in space or time.

Donald wasn’t built for inactivity.

“You need to eat, Donal’,” Panchito insisted, handing over more fruit. Donald sighed, but didn’t argue.

He was sick of fruit. He'd give so much for a burger right now.

"We are nearly done with the prototype!" Panchito continued cheerfully, plopping on the bed. "Soon we can test it!"

"On me?" Donald asked. Panchito shook his head, still smiling.

"No! Well, eventually. But first on someone who does not have your magical scarring," he explained. "We do not do testing on the injured person first!"

"I mean," Donald hedged, frowning. "It would make more sense to use me. I'm the only one with the issue you're trying to address."

"The *last* test hurt you," Panchito insisted, shaking his head. "No, we will not do that until we know this will not cause more hurt."

Fair enough.

If Donald was in better shape, he'd be more resentful that nobody was letting him help. Most forceful about being involved. At least in the planning stages. They barely wanted him *standing,* apparently Merlin had decided he shouldn't do *anything* until they got the scarring under control.

He didn't understand *why;* the pain hadn't been any worse after their brief visit to the Caribbean. Or after the battle! But for whatever reason, Merlin was now all worried about things.

Donald felt… coddled. Or overprotected. They were keeping something from him, he suspected, but he was just. Too tired to care.

He didn't like that Panchito and José were in on it, though.

He'd expected it from Mickey, who was known to take on everyone else's issues and make them his own; he'd be feeling overprotective over Donald's issues purely because they'd known each other at the time the injuries happened. Like proximity should have protected him. Like he should have sensed Donald's issues, somehow, and resolved them *for* him.

Ridiculous. But he was a *King,* and a King took responsibility for their kingdom.

Goofy was focused on finding Sora; he'd barely been around to say anything besides 'feel better!' Donald had no idea what he was thinking about things, besides focusing on the missing kid. Which Donald more than respected, he wanted to be focused on that too-

But his partners were apparently convinced if he so much as breathed funny he would die, and were desperate to keep him where he was.

He didn't understand why. He *wasn't in danger.* Sora was! Sora was a kid out there in the universe alone, maybe with no powers, maybe in some Hell dimension he had no way of navigating, certainly alone and probably afraid, and if Donald let himself think about that for more than five seconds he was going to *rip his feathers out why did they insist on keeping him here when he could be helping-*

Panchito handed him another piece of fruit. Donald ate it.

Internally, he started planning another spell circle.

"We're worried about you, you know," Mickey told him, sitting on the armchair in the room. Donald glared at him. *Mickey* he could be angry at.

"I'm *fine.* I'm sitting in a bed getting treated for *scar* tissue," Donald retorted, arms crossed, temper sparking. He felt off-kilter, uncomfortable with it. He'd had his temper in some kind of control for *years,* but right now he felt on a hair-trigger.

"You're getting treated for *gaping holes* in your internal magical organs!" Mickey snapped, tail thrashing. "Stop pretending that's nothing!"

"It was *fine-"*

"This is what I was talking about! You just keep on pretending the things that happen to *you* don't count! Would you say the same thing if José was the one with the scar tissue?"

Donald scowled; the idea made his hands shake.

He really really hated that Mickey was right.

"It's not like me sitting in bed is going to change things," he grumbled. "I could at least be helping fly the ship."

Mickey glared, but Donald knew him. That was his ‘angry that I can’t fix it’ face, not genuine rage.

“We’ll find him, Donald, I *promise,”* Mickey swore, “But he won’t be happy to hear you’ve gotten hurt looking. Merlin said-”

“What? What did he say?” Donald demanded, clenching his fists. “Because whatever it fucking was, he hasn’t said *shit* to me! Apparently everyone *else* gets to know about my medical issues except for me!”

“”He *did* tell you what was happening, you just don’t want to hear anything that isn’t a clean bill of health!”

“I’m perfectly capable of functioning without magic, I don’t *care* that it looks terrible to him!”

“ *Your scars were ripped wide open!”* Mickey screamed, and the lights flickered in response. “Don’t you get it? Your entire soul, magical body, whatever it is- it was shredding itself to *pieces* because of the Blot, and the volcano thing, and then- the spell that Master Yen Sid cast- they were ripping you apart, Don. You could have *died,* and nobody would have realized until it was too late. He *barely* wanted to let you go to the Caribbean, and then the battle and-!”

“Sora had to rescue you. All of us.” Mickey sighed, drooping. “We were all on the brink of *death,* and you- Merlin said that whatever you did before things reset was bad. Something that would have taken your magical essence, your *soul,* and ripped it to shreds. Please stop asking us all to pretend we didn’t hear him tell you that.”

Donald really wished Merlin had told him privately. This realm really did need some kind of medical privacy expectations.

Though in Merlin's defense, he'd clearly not meant to say anything; his eyes had gone *wide* and face pale at seeing them all, and when he'd seen Donald… Haunted was the word, he thought. Something apparently was lingering around him that even Merlin feared.

He suspected he knew what had happened. What he had done. He was… trying, for now, to not take that into account in his plans. But he suspected that he'd have to acknowledge it at some point.

"I'm not asking you to pretend," Donald finally said. "I'm just asking you all to stop treating me like I'm blind and deaf; I know you're all talking about me. I can tell you're keeping something from me, and it's either about my own fucking *health,* or it's about Sora. I don't appreciate either."

"I get treated like an idiot enough, Mick," he added, and watched Mickey squirm. "I don't really like that you're doing it too."

"We're not- that is- we just don't want you to get more stressed out…"

"And, what? *Not* knowing things will help?"

Mickey squirmed again, tail curling around his legs. Donald pressed his advantage.

"Either you found him or you didn't," he stressed. "What else could there be?"

"Ah- we know he isn't in the Final World," Mickey said carefully. "So

he's not dead. Or sleeping, either. But that doesn't really- you know that Riku had some dream about a giant city. A fictional world? But that's all we know, Don, and we don't know what it *means* ."

It meant, Donald noted, as he nodded and let Mickey change the topic to what Xion and Namine were doing with their newfound existence, that he could rule those places out.

A fictional world? That sounded like a different reality to him. And *that,* that he could work with.

His floor was littered in scribbled out spell circles. None of them were right, none of them would *work,* but he thought he was getting closer. A dozen books from the Disney library hovered around him, as he worked on another one, chewing absently on an apple.

The thing about designing a spell was that technically there were no *rules.* Not directly. There were a thousand different spells to light a fire, after all; every language, every culture, different generations recreating the same work, because spells were personal. He could say *Flare* and it would light a fire, but if Lena tried it without know what it was supposed to do, it would only do what *she* intended.

Which. Would probably still be a fire, that wasn't a complicated one after all. But that still branched out; *Lena* might decide to say *Flara* or *Fire* or something else entirely, and it would still *do* the same thing, because fires were caused by a chemical reaction. It would still just *be* a fire, with the necessity of oxygen and fuel that one would normally have. If you wanted it to not need air, or wood, or something else, you needed a different spell.

Which could *also* just be saying "Fire!" The rules were what worked

for the person casting the spell, not some arbitrary correct word for something. So long as the caster knew they wanted a magical fire that time, knew how to make that happen, and cast *that* spell, it didn't matter. Donald knew there were people that did that in duels, shouting obviously wrong spell names to confuse their opponent, make them expect fire and not ice. It took more concentration than he liked, but it wasn't impossible, just a headache.

All of which to say, designing a new, complicated spell didn't mean finding the right words or symbols, but it *did* mean figuring out what energy needed to go where, and do what, and for how long, and then translating all of *that* into something he could replicate in a spell. Like writing a recipe except he also had to invent the necessary oven and tools and possibly the source of electricity on top of the ingredients and method.

Usually he liked to just let things flow. Most problems that he ran into that needed a magical solution needed a *cure,* which was a much easier project. You just needed to reverse a thing that already existed; a curse or a hex. That was just tracing the spell backwards to undo it.

This kind of creation needed much more creativity than Donald usually wanted to bother with. Rarely did. But he needed to do it anyway, so he kept working.

This one wouldn't be strong enough to travel to alternate dimensions, *that* one wouldn't be precise enough to find Sora when his heart had touched so many others-

He tossed the paper aside and started over.

On the floor, the scraps and pieces of abandoned paper bled ink into each other, still wet when they landed, making all of them blotchy and unreadable. He *could* burn them all or vanish them somehow, but

the less magic he did, the less likely someone would check on him.

They thought he was resting. And he *was,* laying in bed not moving counted as resting no matter what he was doing while lying there.

He pulled another book closer, skimming through it with a frown. This dimension was no stranger to traveling to other related parts *of* it; death, darkness, sleep. Parts of the whole, places where the living rarely could tread safely. But he didn't think that's where Sora was; the others were searching, and hadn't had any luck there. He didn't have the energy to waste on redoing work.

But all of the resources he had were for looking in those places. The Power of Waking, the pathways of Darkness, everything was predicated on those levels of the dimension. Nothing else.

Well. There was *one* other kind of portal.

Donald shoved the book aside and reached for the notes on the portals to Duckburg instead.

Interlude: Dewey and Distractions

Everyone was just a *bit* tense when they got home. Uncle Scrooge was hanging out with Uncle *Gladstone* of all people, chatting about feathers and preening, and Dewey knew enough to know they both were worried about something and trying to distract themselves. Usually Uncle Scrooge would choose some cool new adventure, but apparently he'd decided to pull an Unca Donald and just hang out with family instead.

Huey would swat him for saying that. But it was *true.* Unca Donald had been finding time to see Uncle Gladstone, and Fethry, and all of these *other* friends and whoever, because he was obviously worrying about something else and didn't want to talk about it.

Like. It was super obvious. If Unca Donald was anything like Mom he'd probably be proposing adventures, too.

Everyone wanted a distraction. Just not from the same stuff.

That was fine. They could all be the same distraction.

Step one? Find Webby. She was his right hand gal, his sister in arms, his partner in crime!

And despite them being on different teams, she and he had been working on sorting through all the stuff they already had for the Donald Duck Secrets Society (formerly the Donald Duck Connection Competition). They had a pretty good timeline of events, a few loose ends here or there but nothing *huge.* And now they had this giant crate of tapes to go through!

From these… other triplets.

He wanted to meet these other triplets. Just to talk! Just- he wanted to know these other people Unca Donald had helped raise.

Who were also triplets.

Apparently the one Webby had reached was an MMA fighter, and she'd been happy to respond to their email, but was out of town so had just sent over everything they had in storage.

Boxes worth of stuff. Photo albums, loose tapes, even that old photo film stuff Huey said to not let the sunlight hit or they'd ruin it. They'd mailed it to the houseboat directly so that Mom and Uncle Scrooge wouldn't see any of it, staking out the boat daily for the mail to make *sure* they caught it in case Unca Donald was home, had shoved it into their old bedroom on the boat so they didn't have to try and haul it up the hill without being seen.

He and Webby had taken over sorting the stuff. Some of it was clearly just the other triplets family stuff; photos of them as babies and things like that. Webby had offered to digitize the *tapes,* so they just packed all of that back up neatly and set it aside.

Well, okay first Dewey looked at some. Just out of curiosity. And huh, apparently *they'd* done that whole matching outfit thing Unca Donald had never done with them. Funny. Dewey wondered if that was why he'd been so insistent on them not wearing matching outfits. He'd figured it was because Unca Donald was a twin himself.

He didn't hate them or anything. Well, he didn't *completely* hate them. He was just… a bit jealous. Teeny tiny bit. *They* were Unca Donald's kids, but now he was having a baby and he'd had other triplets before

and Dewey just missed when it was just them on the houseboat.

But if they were still on the houseboat they wouldn't have met Webby. Or gotten Mom and Uncle Scrooge back. He'd miss them, too.

It was silly.

Unca Donald would tell him it wasn't. That whatever he was feeling wasn't silly, they were just his feelings, even if the cause might be small. He'd offer to play a song for Dewey to dance to or do cool tricks until Dewey was ready to talk about whatever it was.

Unca Donald always seemed to know what to do to help.

He wasn't home. Not yet. Everyone was wondering about it. He'd been doing more work stuff lately, but he'd never been *late.* He called and told them, or he sent a text or let Mrs. B know or *something.*

Uncle Scrooge said he'd talked to a coworker and he'd just gotten stuck in meetings as soon as he'd gotten back to Duckburg. Left his phone in a conference room or something so the guy had answered for him. Nothing crazy, just more work stuff, and Unca Donald had just left his phone in the wrong room. Just unlucky!

Mom thought he'd snuck off to play hooky with José and Panchito; they weren't at the cabana either, and the egg was gone. But maybe they had taken it for a walk? Unca Donald wouldn't just *vanish* on them without saying something!

He always said something. Always always always.

Dewey forced himself to keep looking at photos. Unca Donald would be home soon, and they needed to have these sorted out *first.* If they played it right, they could get him to grab the other family photos and they could have a whole day of looking through them. Mom had wanted to do it, Uncle Scrooge had been interested, even Uncle Gladstone had wanted some for his new house! It was perfect!

Even Louie agreed with him, and *that* was always a sign a scheme would work, if Louie approved it. Or at least a good sign it would work, it wasn't always a total victory…

Anyway!

They'd gotten through the albums without, well, *anything* to show for it, but there were plenty of loose photos in the box that were way better. Blurry shots of Uncle Donald, younger and in a blue flannel most of the time, carrying the younger girls, or chasing them around a small yard. Sleeping, mustaches drawn all over his beak, José sprawled on top of him or Panchito laughing and holding up the marker with a finger held comically to his beak.

Unca Donald chasing *them,* face red with rage, a trail of destruction behind him.

Some kind of lessons; the triplet in orange in a martial arts uniform of some kind, Unca Donald in a plain tanktop. There were a lot of those ones, actually; he and Webby dug through them until they found the perfect shot, the girl mid-punch, Unca Donald's arm up for a block. The pride in his face was clear; no grumpy face or stress lines, just pleased and grinning.

Dewey liked that one. It was the first one that *looked* like their uncle,

not a younger clone of him. He'd never realized how often he wore that expression until they were looking through these pictures; he looked angry, or stressed, or he looked like he was laughing and having a good time, but something was missing from them. Something that made him *Unca* Donald.

They found another good one with the triplet in yellow, the two of them pouring over some book that they couldn't make out, papers all over a small rickety table. José was in that one too, peering over their shoulders, pointing at something.

Dewey wondered what they'd been talking about.

Them all at a pool, Miss Daisy was there too, with the orange triplet on her shoulders; Unca Donald had the purple one, and Panchito the last girl; they were all shoving at each other in the water, clearly yelling, splashing water making the whole picture sparkle.

"Do we have one of just her yet?" He asked Webby, after staring at that one for a long time, pointing at the purple girl. Webby peered over, from where she was sorting through the video tapes.

"Um… yeah!" She cheered, hopping up and doing a flip over her piles to get to some of the other picture piles.

Webby was so freaking cool.

"Yeah, here's June and Unca Donald doing… um… I'm not sure?" She said, handing it over. Dewey took it eagerly.

This one had the purple- okay, *June,* wrapped in piles of fabric like a

fashion forward mummy, while Unca Donald faced her with an umbrella brandished as a sword. In the background, Miss Daisy was stomping towards them with a deadly glare.

"You know…." Dewey said slowly, looking down at the small photo in his hands. "I think we have one just like this of me? Only I was a toilet paper mummy."

He didn't think, he knew. It was hanging on the wall near the bathroom. Shot from a lower angle, because Huey had taken it. Unca Donald's grin was just as wide in both.

Looking at this one now was a funny feeling. Jealousy? No, not… it wasn't that. Not anger, it didn't even feel bad, just a weird longing. He wanted to be there, even though he *had* been there, when it was his turn.

Maybe he just missed Unca Donald. He put the photo with the others.

They put the rest of the unrelated photos back into the boxes, then called everyone into the boat to look at the tapes.

There were… a lot.

"May said her sister got a camera for her birthday and filmed *everything* for a while," Webby explained dubiously, poking the piles with her toe. "Some of them had labels, but, well, I did offer to sort through them…"

“We could set it up to go automatically?” Huey offered, pointing to the VCR in the living room. “Then we just need someone checking to swap the tapes?”

“We still have to watch for stuff of your uncle,” Gosalyn grumbled; she was the least invested in things, once they’d gotten going. Dewey was pretty sure she was only around because she wanted to do *something* and she wasn’t allowed to work on the investigation Darkwing was doing.

He didn’t blame her; they’d found some cool stuff right away at the beginning; superstars and actors, really blurry newspaper images that *might* have been a ten foot goddess, Unca Donald fighting some giant monster carrying a glowing sword- it was really cool stuff!

And then they’d kinda just… stopped finding anything new. There had to be more, right? Sword fighting was pretty cool, but normal for their family. They were looking for something *juicy*. Being friends with a superhero was epic but not exactly the same thing as *being* a hero, so he could see why Gos wasn’t as keen on the whole mystery as they were. *She* had a hero for a dad.

“We can do that after it’s all digitized, though,” Huey replied. “Use a program to scan through for his face, or-”

“Or we can just fast forward through stuff,” Louie pointed out. “I can do that part.”

“That’s because you would just have to sit watching TV,” Dewey retorted; Louie grinned smugly at him.

“And? It’s what I’m good at! None of you would want to sit there the whole time anyway.”

“I could join you!” Boyd offered. “It sounds interesting!”

“And it means that Louie can’t take all of the points should the tapes provide a new individual to identify,” Violet added blandly from her seat. Dewey gasped and spun to dramatically point at Louie, who looked annoyed at getting caught.

“ *You-”*

“Hey, it would be fair if I was the only one watching!” He insisted, but shrugged at the loss. “Fine, so we do it in pairs or something. No one team gets all the points, and that way nobody gets bored watching a hundred hours of boring home videos of someone we’ve never met.”

“She *did* offer to send us tickets to her next fight though!” Webby told them, grinning. “Next time she’s nearby! Granny said she’d let me go if we could convince an adult to go with us.”

“What, does she not count?” Dewey asked, blinking. Webby’s situation with her granny was weird, sometimes, but Mrs. B *not* wanting to be the supervision was weird.

“Oh, she says it would be best she not go. I guess she gets *way* too into it?” Webby answered, frowning. “She said it wouldn’t be proper, so we should go with someone else. She even said *Launchpad.”*

Silence, while they all considered that.

“So…”

“We *need* to go with LP,” Gos declared, shooting to stand up. “Can you *imagine,* that would be hilarious!”

“Do it, do it, get the tickets, Webby! It’s gonna be *great!”* Dewey shouted over her, leaning close so he could stare into her eyes properly. “We’re gonna get into like eight car crashes and eat our weight in popcorn!”

“Do they serve popcorn at MMA fights?” Violet asked.

“We’ll bring our own if we have to!”

That was about when Louie threw the first pillow, and everything got derailed while Dewey sought violent retribution, accidentally bumped into Lena, and it was chaos from there.

“Do you think he misses us when he’s gone?” Dewey asked Huey’s bunk later, staring up from his own bed. He never slept well when Unca Donald wasn’t there to say goodnight. Even if they fell asleep before he actually got there, he slept better when he knew Unca Donald would be by later.

“Course he does,” Louie replied. Confident. He’d never wondered about it; *he* was the baby. The one that liked to just sit and be calm with Unca Donald, watching TV or napping. Sure he caused trouble with his schemes, but Unca Donald was usually fine with helping clean up the mess so long as Louie helped, promised not to do it again, and explained *why* he’d done it, and they talked through why it had been wrong to do it in the first place.

He'd muttered his reasons under his breath when Mom had grounded him, sitting alone in his bunk. Muttered and mumbled and whispered them to himself, because Mom had said she didn't care about his excuses.

It had been… weird. But they hadn't known what to do; maybe Unca Donald's way was… well, not *wrong.* But not the only way? Maybe Mom had a reason to not let Louie explain himself, like if *she* was his age doing that stuff it was a bad thing to… explain.

She did say that Louie reminded her of herself, when it came to schemes. And Dewey got that! But he didn't think Louie would ever stubbornly camp alone hunting a wendigo because he wanted his brothers to go with him. When they'd already said no, or hadn't even been asked in the first place, or-

Well. He didn't think it was really the same thing, under the surface. But she *was* their Mom. And Mrs. B hadn't said anything, so it had to be right…?

He wanted Unca Donald back. This wasn't a Dewey problem. He wanted to tell his uncle and have him do the adult thing, and Dewey could go back to being Dewey.

Dewey, who was the loud one. Energetic, exciting, the coolest! And sometimes, maybe, a bit much. Just a bit. He tried to be fun and interesting because *Huey* was smart and a Woodchuck, and Louie was the clever planning guy, and Dewey *was* the adventurer, but in a family of adventurers what did that even *mean?*

"He's probably parenting some younger guy at the office right now, cause he misses us so bad," Huey added. "'Go eat something, you need to take a break!'"

Dewey laughed; he could picture it. Unca Donald all grumpy, packing a lunch for his coworkers because they were eating nothing but cheap ramen and coffee.

Sure, his mental image of Unca Donald's office was based on TV shows, but he *had* seen Uncle Scrooge's offices and was pretty confident that was just how jobs went. You were tired and drank a lot of coffee, did paperwork nobody read and attended meetings nobody wanted to be at, and you ate terrible food because that's just what you did.

"'You should be getting at least eight hours of sleep, even when we have to fly all over the place to look at *paperwork',"* Louie added with a chuckle. "Think he tries to get them to sleep on the plane too, so they don't have jet lag?"

"Hey, come on, it's useful to be acclimated-" Huey started.

"You just agree cause you're a mini-Unca!" Dewey called up at him, laughing. "You tell us to brush our teeth too!"

"Well *someone* has to remind you!" Huey huffed, but he sounded pleased. "Otherwise you'd have eight cavities and would smell like a sewer!"

"Mini-Unca," Dewey declared again, and there was laughter from above and below him.

"I thought Huey was the Fethry," Louie said after a minute.

“Nah, just cause of the hat? And the sciencey stuff, I guess, but nope! Huey’s Unca Donald cause he’s all parental and in charge, and also because he can punch through a wall if he gets mad enough,” Dewey said brightly, gesturing as he talked even though they couldn’t see him.

“Does that make me Uncle Gladstone, cause we’re both lazy?” Louie asked. Dewey opened his mouth to answer, then paused. Because Louie didn’t sound *excited* about that. More… what’s the word for when you expected it, but were sad about it?

He’d ask Huey later.

“Pretty sure Uncle Gladstone doesn’t have a khopesh,” he said instead. “Or, like, any interest in treasure. He’d just wish for one and a mermaid would show up to hand him one.”

A snort. It sounded hesitant.

“You’re more like… uh, well, mom? She’s all crafty and makes cool plans!”

“... Uncle Scrooge said she and I were sharp,” Louie said hesitantly. He didn’t sound super thrilled, but it was less sad than before.

“Yeah! So you’re more like her, except you wouldn’t get on a rocket-anyway! So who am I?” Dewey demanded, interrupting his own thoughts with *so* much smoothness. He was the most smooth. It was him.

“Fethry,” both his brothers replied. Dewey blinked at the top of his

bunk.

“Uh, really?”

“Yeah, he’s full of energy and super curious!” Louie explained, kicking gently at the bunk in a way that meant affectionate.

“You would totally take the opportunity to go stay in an underwater lab for a while, just to see cool fish swimming by,” Huey added.

Dewey considered that. He couldn’t say he *wouldn’t,* even if he didn’t think he’d want to stay as long as Fethry had. But he liked curious and energetic. That sounded cool.

He thought he’d like to be the Unca Donald, though. He’d been startled by it, during the Moonvasion thing, but now… he wouldn’t mind. He had *moves,* and badass hero friends. That was cool enough to make up for his ‘gotta be safe all the time’ thing.

And…

Dewey shuddered slightly, remembering the bright, red light coming straight at him. The smell of burning, like his feathers had already lit on fire. Maybe Unca Donald had a point, sometimes. About being safe.

But he didn’t mind being Cousin Fethry. He was a cool guy! He had a giant mutant krill for a friend, that was *epic-*

Then something else occurred to him.

“Wait, does that make *Webby* Uncle Gladstone?”

Interlude: Goofy - Shieldbreaker

Goofy was a protector. It was in his bones. Had been since the moment he'd met his friends. He wasn't the best in a fight, not the kinds that Donald would pick, but he didn't need to be. He'd been a different kind of protector. The kind that you told your problems, who didn't judge or argue when you needed to vent. A protector against judgement, against loneliness. A listening ear when you felt like nobody understood you.

He hadn't understood the industry Mickey was in, even as a kid, but he hadn't needed to. He'd needed to be the normal guy, the one that didn't have an agent you needed to go through to be seen with, the one that could just go to the movies or host a sleepover without paparazzi buzzing around the doors. His old pa had been more than happy to chase off any of the buzzards that did try to circle around, anyway. Goofy just needed to be a good friend, a normal friend, while Mickey's life got so frantic.

Then Penelope had gotten pregnant, and he'd needed to be another kind of protector. He'd looked at that small test in her hands, and sworn then and there that he'd do anything to protect their child. From anything. From everything.

It wasn't really realistic. And Max had strained against some of it, as a kid, when their family had gone from three back to two. But he'd held firm on it. He'd be the guard against harm. Max didn't need a Knight, though. He needed a dad. Someone to talk to, someone to understand his troubles and misunderstand his drama. A guy that listened and tried, made silly jokes that were thirty years too old to be funny. Who made dinner and burned it half the time, who never missed a game or a concert.

Goofy had suspected, the first time he'd met Sora, that he'd needed a dad, too, not a Knight. But Goofy had orders. Magic ones, ones that couldn't be broken, and he'd done what he could to cover what his *job*

was as well as what Sora *needed.*

Donald had gotten it without having to be told. He'd played the part of the guardian and the mentor more than the parent, but Donald really couldn't help himself; see a lonely kid against the world, and he would do anything to protect him. *He* was the warrior, really, the one that would keep you from getting hurt.

Goofy thought that was why he was clearly struggling with Sora's departure. They hadn't fought him on it, let him complete his task so that Kairi wouldn't be the one lost, but Donald was the one that wanted everyone safe, even if they resented it. He wasn't handling one of his kids being out there alone very well. Not at *all.*

Goofy couldn't say he was doing much better.

"He's barely eating," Panchito murmured to their little trio, coming back with an empty bowl and a half-empty one. "He does say that Potions can be filling, and he is taking many, but I think he should be eating more than this?"

Goofy sighed. No, he didn't think Donald was taking the news well at *all.* Especially the part where they kept him in his bed and not out there searching.

"Maybe he's just not in the mood for soup?" he offered, but he knew perfectly well that wasn't the case. When Donald was hungry he'd eat just about anything.

Panchito murmured under his breath, then glanced back up at him, expression hopeful.

“Have you found out anything? From Riku’s dreams?” he asked. Goofy shook his head.

“The King and Riku’ve been trying to ask around, see if anyone knows what it might mean, but no luck so far,” he told him. They hadn’t had any luck *anywhere,* really. No worlds had a trace of Sora, and nobody had heard of this fictional world.

Aqua, Ventus and Terra had been searching the Realm of Darkness, but they hadn’t found anything either. They’d said the place seemed weird, though. Smaller.

Aqua thought that meant more worlds were gaining pieces of themselves back from the dark. Without the Organization causing trouble, Heartless were dropping like flies and worlds were recovering; the Realm might be smaller because things were being put back together.

She’d said the Dark Meridian was gone. None of them knew what to make of it.

They didn’t know if they should tell Donald or not. Or, the others didn’t. Mickey was worried about him doing something about it, possibly undoing any good his bedrest had managed. He kept saying Don couldn’t be expected to sit back if he knew there was a problem, so they needed to do it for his own good.

Goofy didn’t really like that idea.

Panchito and José were more uncertain, listening to Merlin’s words closely because none of them knew how to handle… whatever it was that was happening with Donald. Merlin thought he should be kept as calm as he reasonably could be, at least until he’d stabilized, and then

they could talk about more uncertain things. He was already worrying about Sora, after all. Save the additional stress for at least a bit.

Donald had apparently done *something* during the time none of them could properly remember from the battle, when Sora had had to-

Well. Go find them, risking his own health in the meantime.

-And Don didn't rightly know what he'd done, only that he'd done something. José kept peering at him and frowning, saying only that there was something odd about his magic signature at the moment. Something lingering that he couldn't quite place.

Don got all the cool powers, Goofy thought with a laugh.

Then he made sure he was being quiet, and continued what he was doing.

Sneaking into Donald's room to tell him exactly what was happening, because medical advice or not, he didn't like him being out of the loop. Don deserved to know, and frankly Goofy thought they were missing something obvious: that *Donald* might know what was happening. He didn't know what happened during the *battle,* that didn't mean the rest of it was a mystery.

Besides, Donald wasn't really that likely to care about the issue. Goofy was the one that had been with him since they'd gotten here, and if there was one thing Donald did *not* care about, it was the balance of Light and Dark.

“They’re all so worried about Light and Darkness and- you know how you avoid shadows, Goofy? Huh? You’re a photographer, how do you avoid shadows Goof! Tell me so I can balance the entire reality based on this incredibly simple concept!”

They’d been drunk at home; Max and the boys passed out in their rooms, Donald just returned from something he couldn’t explain, just a ‘custody issue’ that he’d helped a friend with. Goofy suspected a morally correct but entirely illegal kidnapping, and had said nothing.

“Well, Don, usually you diffuse the light so it’s not so harsh!”

“See! We need a giant diffuser for the Light and we’ll be fine!”

“Gawrsh, I’m not sure I have one that big!”

They’d laughed, and then Donald got somber, looking at the dark hallway to the bedrooms.

“If I could just take Sora and the others and bring them here, I’d never go back,” he’d confessed. “ *Fuck that place, it’s basically a magical zombie apocalypse!”*

“Don’t think he’d go for that,” Goofy had replied. Because he didn’t disagree. There were really amazing things in Kingdom Hearts, but every time they left he wondered what would be there when they came back.

“Nah, he’d want to bring everyone*, and there’s only so much paperwork I can do to invent false identities before it looks suspicious- you know Mickey was just going to wing it when he brought Minnie over?”*

Goofy had laughed. Of course he had; Mickey fully believed in things working out so long as you tried.

And they could. But it usually depended on someone like Donald, who knew *how* to make things work out. Because he didn’t trust in the world, he trusted his own hands.

“ *Just gonna bring this queen over from another dimension, no need for identifying documents so she doesn’t get deported or arrested, I’m only a really famous movie star who gets photographed wherever I go!”*

“Don? You awake?” Goofy called quietly, but he didn’t really need to. The lights were on, and Donald was surrounded by scraps of paper and books. As Goofy glanced down, the pieces on the floor began to bleed ink, like they were blotting themselves out so he couldn’t read them.

“Goofy? What- is there news?” Donald demanded, sitting up and nearly upsetting his bottle of ink. He flicked a hand at it in irritation, and the cap flew over to seal it. Another flick, and the whole mini desk on his lap flew to sit on the nearby *actual* desk, which itself was covered in more books.

“Nothin’ bout Sora yet,” Goofy said sadly, watching Donald’s face fall. “We’re runnin’ out of worlds to search; least ones anyone knows about.”

“Anyone checked the Underworld?” Donald asked, leaning forward with feverish interest; Goofy blinked, and shook his head.

“Huh, don’t think so- I’ll take a trip out in the morning, how’s that? Maybe he’s just down there, bugging Hades!”

Donald chuckled, sitting back a bit, but he still looked manic.

“Take someone with you,” Donald ordered. “Since I don’t think they’re letting me up anytime soon.”

“Well, you gave ‘em all a right scare!” Goofy insisted, taking a seat in a close armchair. “You gotta eat, Don, we’re worried.”

“I’m really not hungry. Not- I’m not nauseous, and I feel *fine,* I just feel full. Think it’s all the Potions and spells, they’re probably passively giving me nutrients,” Donald said absently, fiddling with the blankets and frowning.

Goofy didn’t really get spells, or magic, and he *did* know that Potions could make you feel full. He *also* knew that when they got home and Potions weren’t available, they were always ravenous and still struggled to eat *real* food for a few days after returning.

He also knew Donald knew that, so he didn’t push it.

“We do have something weird happening in the Realm of Darkness though,” Goofy revealed. “Not sure what to make of it! Whole ocean is gone!”

“Not gone,” Donald replied immediately, looking back up. “I, ah- I remember that part. When- when we got blasted into oblivion or whatever that was, I was… it’s hard to describe.”

Goofy nodded, and stayed quiet. He’d promised not to ask questions, if Donald wanted to open up, after all.

“So. I was in the water, I think. Mentally, anyway, it’s- when you’re using elemental magic, you have to feel like you’re part of it, in a way. Really understand it on a fundamental level. But if you go *too* far, it’s hard to remember where you end and the magic begins. It’s why it’s risky to do, especially if you’re not in the right mindset. And I was…”

“Not?”

“Not,” he agreed. “But while I was there, I could sense the ocean in the Realm of Darkness. Could sense *all* of the oceans, I think, the barriers between them were so thin, and they wanted to dissolve, and I… did. That. And then kinda cleansed out the darkness, until Sora woke me up.”

He said all of this to his blankets.

“So I might have accidentally connected the worlds, or at least the ones with an ocean on them. And also cleaned out the darkness entirely from it this time, instead of just filtering out a bit like last time. Calypso was grateful, at least?”

Goofy stayed silent for another moment, thinking.

“Mick’s gonna throw a fit about that,” he said finally. Donald groaned.

“Him, Yen Sid, probably Merlin- all everyone talks about is how they need to keep the worlds apart, and I fuck it all up, what? A week after Mickey removed the spell?!” Donald moaned. “I wasn’t doing it *intentionally,* I wasn’t even aware of what I was doing at all until later, but *fuck-”*

“Not really your fault, Don,” Goofy said soothingly, patting his shoulder.

“I should know better,” he grumbled. “You can’t lose your mind when you’re doing elemental magic. I’m lucky that I *didn’t* get sucked in completely.”

“I’m glad you didn’t do that!” Goofy told him earnestly. “I’d miss you if you were turned into a tidal wave!”

Donald chuckled, then glanced at him cautiously.

“I- I think the only reason I wasn’t was because there was a conflict,” he said slowly. “I mean- don’t tell the others? Not yet?”

Goofy nodded, scooting a bit closer.

“I think something *else* was calling to me. And it’s why I couldn’t lose myself in the ocean. Something else was there first,” he said, and his tone was dark, and grim.

And determined.

“Don?”

“I think I can use it to find Sora,” Donald told him. “But you’re not going to like it.”

Goofy listened.

Donald was right. He didn’t like it.

“You sure about this, Don?” Goofy asked, looking over the documents in his hands. He didn’t know the first thing about magic, or spells, or spell circles, so he wasn’t sure *what* he was looking at.

“Sure as in, I know the spell will work?” Donald replied absently. ”Or sure as in, am I willing to do this?”

“Both.”

“You never know, the first time you cast a spell, if it’ll do exactly what you’re aiming for. But it’ll work,” he said slowly. “It has to.”

He didn’t answer the second question. Goofy really didn’t need to ask.

“You gonna tell your fellers first?”

Donald laughed at that, sounding tired and strained.

“Don’t really have a *choice,* do I?” He asked, but he didn’t sound angry. He actually sounded comforted by it; that they wouldn’t *let* him keep them in the dark. “They’re worried, so worried, but I have to do this, Goofy. I *have* to.”

“I’m not sayin’ you shouldn’t. But, you know, they’re all worrying about what happened on the battlefield, and that Blot thing, and… you’ve got a lot goin’ on, Don, Sora wouldn’t thank you for hurtin’ yourself looking for him.”

“Sora wouldn’t want us to get a *hangnail* looking for him, Goofy! He’s too self-sacrificing as it is,” Donald retorted, shaking his head and clearly not noticing the resemblance. “He needs someone to look out for him.”

“And you don’t like his other options,” Goofy chided gently. Donald rolled his eyes in return.

“ *You,* you I trust. Mickey, probably, but he isn’t really around as much. But the others? Every single one of them is fine with a kid going out there!”

Yes, they were. Goofy was willing to give them a bit of a pass, growing up in a place where not only were all of the keyblades held by teenagers, but where being a kid wasn’t really… an option. They all had grown up fighting.

It didn’t make it *better,* but it made it more understandable.

But Donald was right about one thing in particular. Sora needed someone to look out for him. And the two of them were the best people for the job!

So-

“Alright. What do you need me to do?”

Goofy was a protector. He would do his job, and he would let Donald do his. Because while Goofy was the shield, Donald was the sword.

Astrolab

As predicted, José and Panchito were worried about his plans, when he finally showed them what he had.

"Donal', you're still recovering!" Panchito pointed out, sitting on the bed and holding out another bowl of soup. Apparently Pancho had visited the kitchens (which… existed, apparently) and taught the staff how to make soup. It might be all they knew how to make, in fact. It *was* good.

He still wasn't hungry. It wasn't the 'too-stressed-to-eat' lack of appetite. He just wasn't hungry. But he understood that it bothered his partners to see someone not eating; they weren't used to subsiding on nothing but magic, and from the outside it had to look bad.

"I'm- guys, if we're being honest I'm going to be recovering for a while," he replied slowly, because he didn't necessarily like what he was going to say. "This is a lot of magical scar tissue, that has taken a lot of damage. It would be stupid to expect this to be fixed in a few days."

"All the reason to let it rest!"

"But Sora might not *have* that time! I can't sit here doing *nothing* while he's lost out there!" Donald insisted. "And besides that, I know that elemental magic won't make this worse. What else did we do the ocean test *for?"*

Neither of them responded to that. Because while they'd listed a lot of outside reasons for their choice to go, it had been obvious to Donald that was what they wanted to know. If he could do his usual magic without hurting himself more. And he'd passed, with flying colors

even!

José poured over the spell circle plans, frowning, while Panchito huffed and fussed over the soup. They couldn't argue, but they didn't like it.

"You're taking us with you," Panchito finally declared. Donald nodded; he'd assumed they would come, honestly.

"And we're taking other help," José added absently. "Donald, this- you could lose yourself very easily, with this amount of power. Are you sure you will have… enough?"

Because this was more than the ocean, any ocean, could handle. The ocean was vast, and powerful, and old, but it was still constrained to one planet.

Donald needed to search the galaxy; he'd need something bigger.

But what was the sky but a sea of stars?

"I will. It's not that part I'm worried about, it's the tether. You two are usually enough, but…" Donald sighed. "Goofy already offered; he's checking the Underworld first, just in case, but if that's a bust, he's in agreement."

"Just like that?" Pancho asked.

"Just like that."

Panchito considered that, before nodding.

“I like him!”

Donald smiled, helplessly fond, as Panchito turned to peer at the spells José was still holding.

“This circle isn’t part of the searching one,” he noted, pointing. Donald scooted closer to see what he was looking at, then nodded.

“No, that's a protection ring. I didn’t want anyone to be able to interrupt, I don’t know how long this will take,” he explained, tracing his fingers around the outer ring of the spell.

It was one of the more complicated things he’d written; multiple overlapping rings of spell, sigils, and Intent, carefully balanced to keep his mind in check and his soul searching until they could find what they were looking for. Too much power in one place could unbalance the entire thing, but not enough and it wouldn’t work.

Writing spells was more of an art than a science. Magica’s ilk, those that had trained properly and formally, tended to use the same symbols; alchemical and arcane, carefully spaced and laid out by centuries of tradition. They could usually tell at a glance what a spell was meant to do, could often re-use another mage’s spells with minimal issues based on that trained understanding.

Donald hadn’t trained formally. He’d picked up bits and pieces here and there; how certain people wrote their spells and how others laid them out. He used symbols he’d created himself, because he’d been a spy during half of his beginning training and frankly more of his

writing had been in code than normal at that point in his life.

He still remembered accidentally encrypting a message to Della and Scrooge, having *meant* to write a simple Christmas letter. They'd had fun solving it, at least. Better gift than the knick knacks he'd managed to ship to them.

His layouts made sense to *him,* instead of following the common spacing methods or completely even distributions that José favored. He'd been told once that if spells were poetry, his were freeform.

Donald couldn't decide if that was a compliment or not. But they worked for him, and more importantly, besides himself, only José and Panchito could read them.

So they were the only ones who would have realized what, exactly, his floor was littered with. Donald didn't think for a moment that they hadn't already known what he was planning before he'd told them.

It was nice of them to pretend until he was ready to explain, though. Considering everything lately.

"When do you wish to try this?" José asked, looking up. His face was grim, but determined. Donald felt something in him relax; Panchito was one thing, he would go along with Donald's plans whether or not they were actually *good.* José, though… Donald needed to know he also approved.

"As soon as Goofy gets back," he answered. "There's a chance he'll find Sora and this won't even be necessary. But if he doesn't… there aren't any other places to check."

“There is the Realm of Darkness,” José pointed out. Donald made a face.

“I think Sora is more than capable of getting home from there, honestly. There are plenty of ways in and out, and he’s been there before.”

And the varying warnings about the Power of Waking would seem ridiculously overblown if they were just talking about going *there*. People ended up in the Realm of Darkness all the time. What would the real punishment be if that was the only consequence?

He pointedly didn’t think about the consequences *he* was likely to incur with his plan; he knew what he was getting into.

“Then we will get ready! Your friends might get suspicious if you are abruptly up and about, but us? We are sneaky!” Panchito enthused, grabbing a scrap of paper and a random pen. “What will we need, do you think?”

José leaned over and started rattling off things immediately; food for the trip, in case it took too long, Potions and Elixers to be ready for the spells itself, and blankets ‘because deserts get cold at night!’

Donald really, truly, loved these two.

Goofy had returned alone. No Sora, no Mickey, who had immediately rushed off to another duty or to council with Yen Sid or- well. Somewhere.

The kids were scattered and searching, trying to find hints that another of them might have missed, some new direction to search.

Merlin had finally declared Donald was as healed as he reasonably could be from bedrest and piles of varying healing spells; the rest would take time. Donald told him that this was possibly the least painful the scars had been in years; he'd looked downright devastated at *that,* so Donald hadn't shared anything else.

The storage crystal wasn't done yet, which was a pity, but he didn't *need* it for this. It would be nice to test it, but that was about the only thing on his mind.

They didn't sneak out. They didn't have any reason to sneak; he was an adult, they were all adults and he'd been medically cleared (not that he wouldn't have done it *anyway,* but if he was adding justifications…). And it was *their* ship. His and Goofy's and Sora's. Nobody could say a word.

But they did avoid being seen by anyone on their way out. Easier to answer questions after the task, not before!

They took off quietly; Chip and Dale were asleep, and nobody else was near the Gummi ships. Queen Ginny had built up Disney's fleet with the increased contact with other worlds, apparently believing that they were likely going to need better methods of travel going forward.

Donald considered the oceans again, and conceded she was probably right.

He took care of getting them going, then let Panchito steer; what could it hurt? There was nothing out here to hit, after all. Goofy had sat down heavily in his usual seat, promising to be first mate and keep

an eye on their path.

José and Donald went to stow their supplies.

Donald was entirely unsurprised to find a number of stowaways.

“Shoulda made a bet who would catch on,” Donald called to the cockpit, leading their gaggle of teenagers with a wave. “I really feel like we missed the opportunity to fleece each other.”

“What good would that do?” Goofy asked, glancing back with an amused grin. “We’d all win and lose the same amount if we’re fleecing each other!”

“It would have been *funny,* Goofy,” Donald stressed, forcing Kairi into a seat; she looked faint. Axel settled next to her, with Roxas and Xion quickly claiming nearby seats like someone would steal them if they waited too long. Namine, last to appear, carefully took a seat near Goofy, looking at them all with worry.

Riku took the other copilot chair, frowning. Donald didn’t bother pointing out that was *his* seat; it really wasn’t worth the argument, and Riku was a fine pilot, as far as he knew.

“You knew we’d come,” Riku said, sounding put out. Teenagers, Donald grumbled with amusement. Always with the dramatics.

“Figured it was likely. We’re all aiming for the same thing,” he answered, leaning over Panchito’s shoulder to adjust their trajectory slightly. “But I didn’t want to ask.”

“Why?”

“Donal’, stop backseat driving!” Panchito hissed at him, snapping his beak at Donald’s ear with a cackle. “Ai, you’re as bad as your uncle!”

“Okay *first* of all, no I am not, he wouldn’t have ever *let* you drive in the first place,” Donald snapped back, not even trying to fight off a laugh. “ *Secondly,* when did you ever drive with him?!”

“We haven’t; you complained often enough though!”

“He’s right, Don!” Goofy agreed, while José nodded, laughing.

“Why?” Riku repeated.

“Well, he’s a control freak-” Donald started to explain.

“Why wouldn’t you want to ask for help finding Sora? We all want to find him!” Riku interrupted, growling, and the mirth in the ship died an abrupt, painful death.

“Because while I appreciate the help, and how much you love Sora, I don’t know if this will work,” Donald said bluntly. “It might not be necessary, and I didn't want you to focus on this if there were other options that are less iffy. This spell isn't a simple one, and it's complicated and, bluntly, may not even work *with* help. This isn’t an insult, Riku, this was me being pragmatic.

“Besides, I didn’t want to clue in Yen Sid or the King; they’re probably not going to approve of this,” he added, and Riku’s face eased slightly, only to then scrunch up again with guilt.

“How *will* it work? So that we know what we need to do,” Kairi asked. She was sitting a bit straighter now, eyes less vacant. She’d been despondent on and off since Sora vanished, but she seemed to be perking up at the idea of a concrete plan. Maybe Donald *should* have asked them right away, but he wasn’t in the business of demanding kids volunteer for dangerous plans.

Even if he knew they would do it in a heartbeat.

“This spell is designed to seek out Sora’s unique magical signature, from the moment he used the Power of Waking,” Donald explained carefully. “And follow that trail to wherever he is now.”

“And bring him home?” Xion asked now, tilting her head. She’d really come into her own lately, finding her own sense of style and identity besides being a Sora clone. He wished he could spend more time with her, she seemed like a nice kid.

“Maybe; if not, we’ll at least have a path to follow,” Donald answered. Sure, he’d managed it with Poe, but that had been isolated on one planet, and he’d been a bird at the time. Smaller body, smaller mind. Sora was nearly fully grown, magically powerful and powerfully *aware.*

“So, we’re going to the Keyblade Graveyard,” Axel confirmed with a groan. “Cheery place, maybe those ghosts will help us out.”

“Wait, ghosts?!” Roxas demanded.

“Uh… did we not tell you that part?”

Landing was smooth; they were able to get close to the place they’d been standing when…

When.

Donald let the others sit, take a breath of real air and have a snack while he started drawing the spell circle. The inner ring first, carefully outlining the places where each layer of power would twirl and trail over each other, the places where it would pool and where it would flow.

It was a large spell circle. He could barely see it all from where he stood, and had to depend on instinct to be sure everything lined up.

Then he was done, looking it over, while the others chattered quietly.

“So do we stand outside it?” Ventus asked.

Donald turned around, once again unsurprised. Terra and Aqua were joining the others, shedding their armor as their portal closed. They glanced at him, faces determined, and nodded.

He wondered who had snitched.

He nodded back, then glanced at Ventus. He was a good kid, Donald

thought. He deserved better than what life had handed him.

They all did.

“Yes. If we have enough people, we’ll hold hands,” he confirmed, eyeing the length. It would be tight, but these humans had such long arms.

“Does that help?” Aqua asked, walking closer to peer at his work.

“Sometimes. In this case, quite a bit,” Donald said. He looked them over. “You knew where we were, or did someone call you?”

“Riku did. He said you needed someone focused on acting as a tether.”

“An anchor,” Donald corrected carefully. “It’ll help if you think of it as an anchor.”

Aqua blinked, then nodded.

“An anchor. And you’ll be the ship? Going out to find him?”

“Ideally, I’d prefer that, but given the space we’re covering… probably the other way around. Someone needs to stay here to make sure everyone gets back safely,” Donald explained. He didn’t know if she knew what astral projecting was, and now wasn’t the time for that lesson.

“Wouldn’t more people help?” Terra asked now; their entire crowd was walking forward now, everyone naturally falling into their little groups and cautiously walking around the circle.

“If they’re focused, maybe, but there’s a point where there are too many cooks in the kitchen,” Donald answered, and they all took their places in a ring. José and Panchito lingered by him, while Goofy cheerfully walked next to Axel.

With everyone in place, Donald started to draw the outer ring, watching warily as he did. There had been no movement in the desert since they’d arrived, not even the strange haunting feeling of the graveyard itself, but he didn’t necessarily trust that.

Sigils to protect, to shield, to stop. Not to hide, those would take more energy and effort than he was willing to put into it, so if anyone came by they’d be able to *see* them, but they wouldn’t be able to get in unless Donald lost strength.

They were on the right side of the damn barrier, this time.

“Um, should we sit?” Kairi asked, while Donald passed behind her. She had one of the blankets wrapped around her shoulders, knotted so she could hold Riku and Axel’s hands.

“You’ll be more comfortable if you do,” Donald confirmed. “This might take some time; everyone who hasn’t eaten, do that.”

He continued working, while pieces of fruit and more blankets were passed around; some blankets were folded into cushions, others made into capes against the wind that grew chillier and chillier as the sun set.

Donald would admit he was stalling slightly. He needed to see the stars, after all, but he didn't necessarily want to explain that to the group. He didn't want to introduce confusion; that could lead to doubt, and they couldn't afford doubts.

Finally, it was dusk. And finally, the circle was complete. Donald carefully stepped over the lines, wary of the shifting sand blurring some of the lines. They weren't a requirement, but it would certainly help him more if he could still read his work.

Spell circles, in his opinion, were like recipes. You didn't *need* to have one, but for something more complicated, it was a lot easier if the method was written down before you started.

He stood in the circle, with José on one side and Panchito on the other. If they stretched their arms out wide, they could almost brush each other's fingertips; the circle was just a hair too big for the current number of people.

Luckily for them, the last people Donald had expected to follow them had arrived.

"Don!" Mickey shouted, bolting across the desert, blade drawn- was there a threat nearby?

"What are you *doing?"*

Oh.

He was the threat.

Donald stared down the length of the blade, and then at Mickey, who looked terrified. Worried. Determined.

“What do you think we’re doing?” he asked, genuinely curious. Surely searching for Sora wasn’t that shocking of a choice, under the circumstances.

“You- you know that power is dangerous!”

He did. He didn’t think *Mickey* understood it, though.

He glanced behind Mickey, where a few additional figures were approaching them. Two tall, bearded men in blue pointed caps, and three fairies in blue, red and green. The whole entourage, apparently.

“I know perfectly well what I’m doing,” Donald told him, and he should probably be worried about how blandly it came out. He couldn’t get angry right now, his mind was tugged in half a dozen different directions as it was-

In his mind, deep in his mind, his hands were still on the steering yoke of the ship. The stars spread out before him, a map of the sky if you knew how to read it.

He hadn’t docked the ship. Not since the *last* time he’d been on this world.

That- that was concerning. He hadn't even *noticed.*

But it didn't matter right now; clearly he wasn't sinking further, so the situation was stable, even if not ideal.

"No, you don't!"

Donald felt a twinge of annoyance, and narrowed his eyes.

"I am getting *very sick,"* he enunciated, making sure his scratchy hard-to-understand voice was on full display, "of you assuming that because *you* don't know something, clearly *I* can't. Dumb old Donald Duck, right? Couldn't figure his way out of a paper *bag."*

Or a locked pantry. Or his own shirt.

"Don, please…"

Donald eyed the blade again, then turned away to look at the circle.

"If any of you are worried, you can step out now," he offered kindly. "I won't blame you for being wary."

The varying humans glanced at each other. None of them moved.

Goofy turned to look at Mickey with a frown.

“You should trust your friends more, Mick,” he admonished gently. Always, always gentle.

Donald thought it probably hurt more that way.

“Goofy- you don’t know what he’s trying to do! He already-”

“Broke the barriers between worlds while in a trance,” Yen Sid completed, having finally reached them. Merlin, next to him, immediately split away to walk the circle, peering at the varying lines and symbols. Donald wondered if he was even here to argue, or if he was just curious.

The three fairies hovered behind Yen Sid, but Merryweather looked grumpy about it.

“Yeah, exactly!” Mickey nodded to Yen Sid’s addition, while the other wielders murmured to each other. “I know you want to find Sora, pal, but we can’t destroy the world order to do it!”

Donald didn’t listen; he was watching the outer protection circle. Thus far nobody had messed them up, and above them, the sky continued to darken. A few early stars were visible, and they called to his mind.

José shifted closer.

“Your feathers are glowing,” he warned, and so it was; Donald’s feathers seemed to hold a slightly iridescent sheen, like an oil slick had been applied to their underside. Remnants of darkness? Or of the element he was still allowing to flow through him at a trickle?

One had to wonder what it would look like when that trickle became a flood.

"Calypso was grateful for it," he noted about the world order thing. "Honestly, I think it was inevitable. Water wants to *flow,* Mickey."

"Do you even *hear* yourself? Donald, you sound possessed!"

"Phooey, you caught me," Donald said, deadpan. Goofy muffled a laugh.

"This is not a joke." Yen Sid said, in that deep, disapproving tone that made every part of Donald that had created Paperinik's persona *itch* to snark back at. "Clearly in an attempt to accommodate your lack of innate magic you've delved into something far more dangerous. Simply because it is not the power of Darkness does not negate the foolishness of such an endeavor."

Donald considered him. For a long, long moment. Because a part of him knew he shouldn't react. Should explain exactly what he was doing, why he thought it would work, how he knew perfectly well what he'd created and what it was meant to do and Yen Sid's lack of understanding wasn't *his* problem to deal with, nor a sign it was inherently dangerous.

The rest of him?

Not so much.

And unfortunately, for Yen Sid anyway, that part was much larger.

So instead of answering, he flicked a finger, and a gusher of water burst from the ground right in his face, and when the man scowled and waved a hand to react, Donald took that pool of water and froze him to the ground from the ankles down, so instead of stomping forward with dignity and power, he stumbled and nearly fell over, spluttering.

“Oops,” he said, all fake contrition and concern, “I guess the magic *was* too dangerous. You could have tripped!”

Panchito choked, cackling, while the kids managed to stifle giggles themselves. Donald smirked, and felt like his mask was around his eyes for a brief moment. José elbowed him, eyes bright with mirth.

“Master Yen Sid!”

Flora darted to check on him, worrying at the ice and huffing. Fauna slid around the opposite side, wand at the ready but hesitating instead of casting spells. The ice was already starting to melt, either from Yen Sid’s magic or the waning warmth of the desert. Donald didn’t know, or care.

“Unless you’re planning on helping, please step back,” he requested instead, forcing himself to focus. “I’ve never seen what happens if someone is standing *on* the shield when it’s activated, but it’s probably not great.”

“We will not allow-”

“See, this is why I don’t tell you things,” Donald said to Mickey, who had gone silent, staring like he’d never seen Donald before. “You’ve got this idea that the entire universe revolves around you; being declared a *King* went to your head.”

“You’re about to do something stupid and dangerous that you *can’t* know will work, and you’re accusing *me* of being arrogant?!” Mickey retorted, tail thrashing back and forth. There was something lost in his eyes.

“Seriously, why do you think I don’t know what I’m doing?” He asked. Hadn’t they *done* this already? Nothing about the battle had changed a thing about elemental magic or how Donald used it!

“How would *anyone?* This is unprecedented!” Mickey screeched.

Odd word choice, for him.

“According to who?” Donald asked, eyebrows raised. Sure, it was somewhat true, but... “You *do* know that Yen Sid doesn’t know everything, right?”

“Ah- well…” Mickey started, before hesitating. Yen Sid glared at him, waving a hand to melt the ice faster. “Nothing in any of his books or any history here even remotely lines up with these kinds of spells?”

“Mickey. I studied at *home.”* Donald said in exasperation. “We have- my egg is *literally made* of this kind of magic! I learned half of this from *Selene.* In *Ithaquack.* Why would it matter that it doesn’t line up with anything *here?!”*

Silence .

Guilty silence. Mickey abruptly wouldn't meet his eyes, and Yen Sid's face contorted oddly, like he'd tasted something sour.

"Your realm is tragically behind in magical development," Yen Sid declared, and Donald *felt* José stiffen in genuine offense. "The knowledge contained in our realm far eclipses yours."

"So says the person that's never been there, based, I'm guessing, on the word of someone that never studied there," Donald quipped, and Mickey's ears drooped.

He was beginning to get an idea what had happened, now. A young, inexperienced Mickey arriving as the 'King,' talking about their own world to his experienced mentor, and a mutual misunderstanding that Mickey's perception of their dimension's magic community, heavily tempered by the *very* recent Phantom Blot killings, resulted in Yen Sid deciding their realm was magically uneducated and everyone *from* it was as well.

He wouldn't forgive the man for refusing to accept further evidence to the contrary. But it at least answered some questions.

"Did you really learn magic in Ithaquack?" José asked casually. "I didn't know you visited that often."

"Technically I was stranded after a storm and met Circe and studied from *her* , then she brought me to Ithaquack when she realized that Storkules was going to throw a fit if she kept me there," Donald explained absently. "Selene was nice enough to fill in a few gaps; Circe is more of a witch, so her lessons weren't completely compatible. Nice of her not to turn me into a pig, though."

Were they all *that* convinced that Yen Sid couldn't make a mistake?

"Who's Storkules?" Kairi called out; the teens had leaned together to whisper, and she seemed to have been chosen to represent the group. "Do you mean Hercules? Or- is it like how Panchito said he'd met another Merlin?"

"That's exactly it, actually," Donald answered, turning away from the King and the Sorcerer entirely to answer her. "Storkules is our dimension's version of Hercules, though their life stories are a bit different. Merlin is, well- Merlin."

"It would be fascinating to meet my double, I think!" Merlin announced, having apparently finished his perusal of the circle and-

And walking *into* it to stand on Panchito's other side, nodding.

"Now I am very curious to see this in action! Your layouts are truly fascinating, I would like to pick your brain later on placements," he said cheerfully.

"Ah- sure?"

"Splendid, splendid! One should always take the opportunity to learn from others!" Merlin said pleasantly. Pointedly. "You never know what you can pick up by seeing something from another person's perspective!"

Donald smiled, and glanced up at the sky. Still a bit light, but he

thought he could work with it. It wasn't like he had a lot of experience with *this* kind of magic, but if an ocean at high tide was easier to work with, a sky where the stars were visible probably was too.

The other keyblade wielders were watching him. When he met their eyes, one by one, they all nodded. Roxas and Xion looked excited, Riku grimly determined. Namine was hard to read, frankly, but Axel looked about ready to jump out of the ring to fight Yen Sid, so Donald thought they should probably hurry up.

"I will not allow this to continue any further!" Yen Sid snarled, and Donald heard him get closer.

The barrier spell snapped up the instant he got close, closing them all in.

"If anyone wants to back out, now's the time," Donald announced, and he held out his hands.

"Wait, wait!" Merryweather burst out. "Can I join? I want to see this too!"

"Merryweather!" Flora gasped.

"Merlin's right! We should take the chance to learn something new!" She retorted. Donald felt her get closer. "And I want Sora back too."

"You can walk, or float, right through," he told her. "It won't stop you."

“Oh, how interesting!” Merlin said, twisting to watch as the blue fairy floated through like there was nothing there at all, stopping to settle next to him. “Now, is that you controlling it, or is it based on intention?”

“Donald-” Mickey tried.

“Intention; I don’t like to trap people in or out of a shield.”

“Don!”

“Now, if everyone’s ready?” Donald asked, and reached out to clasp hands. They had to stretch wide to reach everyone, but they *could* reach now, with Merlin and Merryweather in the ring.

“Donald.” Yen Sid tried, his innate magic bouncing off the shield like he was searching it for an opening.

He wondered if Mickey would try to Command him to stop.

“I’d recommend closing your eyes,” he added, glancing around at the faces around him. They weren’t watching Mickey or Yen Sid. They were looking at him, and each face was resolute. “Otherwise things can get a bit nauseating.”

“Have you done this before?” Aqua asked, blinking at him.

“Yes,” Donald replied, and he could practically feel the surprise from behind him. “It was a smaller one, but it’s a similar spell.”

Quiet. The gentlest shift of wind.

Donald closed his eyes, and in front of him, the stars beckoned.

Interlude: Master Yen Sid - Brittle Bones

He was an old man. He could admit that. Age was no crime, nor something to be ashamed over. It was a gift. The gift of time spent living, experiencing, learning.

It did come with downsides, of course. Consequences of a life well spent were limbs that ached, stamina that wasn't what it used to. His hearing had begun to struggle slightly, his hands dried out often. He could still fight, when it was necessary, but it was largely as support for the younger, more able fighters.

Being older unfortunately made one more rigid. It was easier for darkness to infiltrate the weak minded, the ones who did not carry strong convictions, but those convictions became brittle with age, and could be hard to move.

Thus the situation with Donald Duck. The Court Mage, and Yen Sid was old enough to recall the last one, somewhat. He'd only met the woman briefly, but she had carried an aura of confidence and power, a calmness in her magical signature that he had envied, as a younger man. As an older man, he had sought to emulate it, to exude that placidity that invited others to feel they could trust him. Trust his advice, seek it out when it was needed.

This Mage had arrived angry, defensive, erratic. He'd taken orders when required to, even when the spell didn't dictate it, but he was abrasive about it. Argumentative. He debated correct responses, he argued about their methods that had worked for millennia and lectured about the Keyblade's Chosen, when in truth they all had very little say who would be chosen. A Keyblade would be passed to the right Heart, of course, but there was no saying when a Heart was ready. When the blade might manifest itself. A child's Heart was naturally full of Light, a destined Keyblade wielder's moreso.

Child soldiers, Donald had always insisted, and hadn't been particularly shy about assigning blame to the entire system.

He'd fallen in line when confronted with Sora, who was Chosen and already in possession of his blade, and Yen Sid had assumed that would be the end of the outward disapproval. Not so.

Perhaps in another, he might have found the dedication to the ideal a noteworthy trait. Someone to emulate, a person that didn't allow their ideals to be lost even when the situation required they at least be bent.

But in him… Yen Sid would admit to being harshly critical of the Mage in return. His magical core wasn't just underdeveloped as the King's had been, it hadn't existed at all. And his constant reliance on pre-built staves, not even built by his own hand… it was a far cry from his predecessor.

The revelation that his magical core was lacking because it had been *removed,* and forcibly at that… he did regret his reaction, with that information in hand. He had assumed the lack was caused by a lack of training, and later a refusal to do so, not a horrifying injury he couldn't quite wrap his mind around.

All living things had a magical core; to still be *alive* without one was… he couldn't fathom it. And yet, the King had confirmed that such an injury was a known quantity in their dimension. A singular man had accomplished this horrid experiment, though to what end the King hadn't specified.

" *I didn't know Don was one of his… I knew he helped catch him, but nothing else,"* he'd admitted in his explanation. Taking credit for a failure not on his part, as he often did. Clearly it was Donald that had chosen not to relate that information, therefore he couldn't take the

blame for his lack of understanding.

And Yen Sid himself could hardly blame himself for not knowing either, as Donald had had ample opportunity to offer that information, in a completely relevant moment, upon his arrival. His insistence that he wouldn't provide information about a personal weakness to *kidnappers* was absurd. He had been Called, not taken off the street. A higher need than what he had been doing, and he would be returned to his life upon completion of duty. Hardly something to complain about.

The Keyblade wielders lost their entire lives to the duty. He could take a much shorter time to complete his own.

The revelation of children of their own, between the Mage and the Knight, was… troubling. The Summons didn't take into account the damages should the chosen ones not return home. And while the King could offer some warning, clearly it wouldn't always be enough, as in this case where Donald had been unable to find a reasonable exit to the situation, causing these others to follow him in worry. Perhaps the Summons ought to take these things into account, but it was meant to find strong willed people, and the strong of mind and heart tended to have equally strong relationships. It was an inevitable issue.

That those two were able to follow was fascinating for a brief moment, but the revelation they carried a shared magically connected set of amulets solved it. Donald lacked a magical core, but *had* worn the amulet on his first Summons. The spell clearly equated one with the other, and had allowed entrance to anyone with a matching signature. An anomaly, but likely a unique one.

Assuming this *Phantom Blot* was caught and his technique never replicated. One had to wonder why Donald had been chosen at all, given his relatively unique magical issue. The Summons only chose its targets upon casting; someone with no magical core at all should never have been up for selection, no matter that they might have once

had potential.

Merlin, when Yen Sid had posited that thought, had insisted that this *Elemental* magic was the likely culprit. That while different, it offered a unique and powerful alternative.

An alternative Donald had never once attempted to use until this visit, Yen Sid had countered. It couldn't be truly beneficial if he hadn't opted for it instead of the less useful staves. But it remained a possible answer until Yen Sid saw it for himself.

And he had. Oh, he had. The Mage had been flung to and fro, glowing with a terrible power he couldn't possibly hope to contain, and moved like a being far larger than himself. While it wasn't the power of Darkness, it *was* clearly something easily misused. Something he could so easily lose control of. Add to that his statement that he'd done some things 'instinctively,' and Yen Sid was convinced that while the magical potential was there, the lack of control was clearly an issue. A power that required complete faith in its wielder was a power prone to immense misuse.

He'd asked that Merlin recommend against all magical activity while they could discuss what they had seen. Merlin had insisted he'd been perfectly in control while he'd been observing in the Caribbean. Yen Sid wasn't convinced. No living being should carry that power; Keyblade wielders were chosen for their strength of mind and form, to avoid being lost in the Light, which by nature didn't lend itself well to tyranny. 'For the greater good' could be stretched, but not as far as Darkness could grant you as a default.

This, this he didn't know. This oceanic magic. It wasn't something he thought even could be affiliated with a natural moral alignment. It was a force of nature, and nature didn't have morals or ethics, it simply Was. Someone seeking to exert control over it would surely lose themselves to the chaos.

And yet, besides the King, nobody else shared that concern. Merlin remained intrigued, and the Knight followed the Mage with complete faith. The two that had come through with him were clearly a lost cause, their bond overrode any concerns that weren't about his health, from Yen Sid's observations.

Thus it was only himself, the King, and his companions the Good Fairies that went to stop him from his foolish endeavor. Facing them were the Keyblade wielders, all of them, the warriors of Light. The Knight. His other companions. Merlin.

Perhaps, had they been able to confront Donald before they'd all reached the Keyblade Graveyard, they could have discussed things properly; gone over the spell circle Yen Sid would admit he couldn't read, the expertise Donald apparently had (he didn't recognize the names he mentioned, but apparently he *had* had magical training prior to arrival), the certainty his spell would function because this wasn't in fact the first time he had used it.

This wasn't the Donald that Yen Sid knew. Or believed he had known. This… this was someone else. This was someone confident in their craft, dangerous though it clearly was, and wasn't taking orders.

There was nothing he could do. He could feel the barrier, and couldn't force his way through it no matter how he pushed. The water that had temporarily frozen him to the ground had receded, but he could feel the barrier and its thrumming power; it wouldn't allow him past.

Donald leaned back, closed his eyes, and above them the sky *glowed.* The stars lit, bright and sharp against the velvet darkness of the night, and he could feel them coming closer.

Not the stars themselves, but the *weight.* The light, the power, it flowed down in a trickle, then a steady flow, to Donald's waiting form.

And from there, Yen Sid watched in frozen, horrified anticipation, waiting for the moment it would begin to gush, when he would lose control of that steady flow, but it never did. It just continued spiraling through him, gentle, calm, controlled, and from there to the next person in the circle.

And the next, and the next. Until the circle was glowing with light but not Light.

"Master," Flora whispered, eyes wide and pinned to her fellow fairy in the circle, "what's going to happen?"

And he was forced to admit something he truly hated to say:

"I do not know."

The King had taken to pacing around the edges of the circle, looking at each member carefully before moving to the next. Yen Sid assumed he was watching for the signs Yen Sid had been convinced they would see; power bleeding from the eyes, as the darkness had done from Donald's face in his earlier endeavors. Cracking of the skin, perhaps, or strange transformations as power not meant to be wielded in such a manner overflowed from the vessel and began to corrupt.

He left the King to it; even from his own vantage point, he could tell there was nothing to see. Somehow, impossibly, Donald seemed to have been right. He *was* in control. The flow ebbed and flowed, but

always with apparent purpose, and never before the spell circle seemed to make space for it. As though it had been designed exactly for it, somehow flexible in how much energy it contained so long as it remained balanced. Every wave of new magic hit the sections of the circle exactly as the first had, a spiral that never overbalanced, never tipped one side too far.

It was Masterful. Yen Sid couldn't deny it. And he could not deny that he didn't understand. This was something he couldn't wrap his mind around, and the thought rankled. He should understand this. He had been studying magic longer than Donald had been alive in either dimension, and yet this-

This eluded him.

Spells were designed for the amount of power needed. One *had* to know how much to draw in, to reform and repurpose into a Purpose. He was aware that Donald lacked the necessary parts to do so, but magic didn't work in a fundamentally different way because of that, surely.

Surely, and yet here they were. Merlin had seemed to have some more insight, calling it a magical core *of* the element in question. The thing that couldn't be depleted entirely or the entire thing, whatever it happened to be, would die. Some elements were far more resistant to being used for precisely that reason, but Yen Sid was trained in the Light, which spread when used. For every drop of power utilized by a Keyblade, more flowed back in when that wielder's aims were successful.

How one could utilize the core *itself*… he didn't understand. Even watching it happen, he didn't understand.

"Master?" The King had completed another circuit, and he was

frowning. He seemed as lost as he had been on his first arrival. It was not an expression Yen Sid had wanted to revisit; they had worked to build up his confidence, his resilience. Doubt allowed darkness to creep in.

"Your Majesty," he returned, and the mouse's face drooped further.

"You don't always need to call me that," he said, and Yen Sid's brows drew down.

"It is your title."

"Yeah, but it's not- I'm not… I think Donald had a point. About me getting a little too in my head about that," he said slowly, tail twitching back and forth rapidly. "I've been trying to operate like a King, because that's what was needed. And Kings make decisions. Important ones, and they- I can't allow room for uncertainty. Either I'm certain of my choice, or I don't make it. But Donald… he's right. I've been acting like that means I *can't* make a mistake, and that I always know best once I've made a choice."

"You are hardly incapable of admitting a fault," Yen Sid replied. Mickey was in fact better at it than he was, though it wasn't the time to say so. "Donald overreached in his assessment."

"Did he?" Mickey returned, looking up to meet his eye. "He's magically trained, and not by me, and not *here*. I didn't know that. It didn't even occur to me to ask, even though his family is *always* adventuring and finding weird artifacts or fighting witches, or- he's the expert back home. He probably should have been the King, not me."

"Roles are chosen for a Reason," Yen Sid cut him off harshly, before

softening his tone. “You are a good King, Mickey. Do not allow an error to make you doubt yourself.”

“Then we should both have assumed he knew what he was doing,” Mickey retorted, “since he *was* chosen as the Mage!”

To that, Yen Sid had no response. Because it was true; either Mickey had been Chosen correctly for his position and the spell could be trusted to have made correct selections, or there had been some error in Donald’s own Choosing and thus the entire process was in doubt. One couldn’t have it both ways. He conceded with a nod.

“That being said,” he felt compelled to add, “Had he explained further, we may have trusted his assessment. There is quite a lack of transparency in this case, which limited our ability to understand what he was attempting to undertake.”

“Because *he* didn’t trust *us,”* Mickey stressed, and ah. Here was the crux of the issue.

Yen Sid was aware they were acquainted in their home dimension. Had been close, before natural drifting had occurred in adulthood. From Mickey’s point of view, Donald’s lack of explanation was a deeper wound.

One that he wasn’t best suited to assisting with. Fauna, though, stepped closer with a sympathetic look.

“Now, your Majesty, I don’t think it’s quite like that,” she said, hovering lower so she could look him in the eyes easier. “Mage Donald seems to have a lot on his shoulders, it may have just slipped his mind you weren’t aware!”

Mickey turned to her, eyes wide, and just the slightest bit nervous.

"Yeah?" He asked, no signs of the King in his voice. But the fairies had been with Yen Sid almost as long as Mickey had been being trained; they had seen him far less Kingly. She nodded, smiling brighter at his attention.

"Oh, yes! He explained things when we asked them, didn't he?" She said simply, bobbing up in the air before she settled again. "I think he just forgot you didn't already know the details!"

Yen Sid doubted that part. Donald had seemed more that he didn't expect to be questioned. He hadn't proposed a solution for them to put down; he'd concluded, correctly, that they would not agree and had simply bypassed their disagreement entirely. But Mickey nodded slowly, and seemed to accept it, standing straighter and casting an eye on the desert.

"Then we'll have to see if he's willing to walk me through it again," he decided. "And if not, then… I'll have to see about studying up at home. Sounds like there's more to our dimension's magic than I realized."

Every inch the King. The Summons *had* chosen well.

Which meant that they would have to trust that the choice in Mage was correct, as well.

The King went back to patrolling, but with less fear, more determination. Glancing at his companions, but equally looking out to the desert for potential enemies.

This area was bereft of anything save the small puddle near them that had refused to evaporate or soak back into the ground. Likely a result of the cold, but Yen Sid did eye it in their wait. There had been no water and no life on this world for as long as he could recall, in the scant few times he had been here. It was a dreary dead place full of forgotten blades and harsh reminders of the dangers of their war against the Dark.

Now there was water. Now they were hearing about mermaids being spotted in the Caribbean. About someone sighting Captain Hook's ship sailing in the distance outside Destiny Islands. Things were *connected,* in a way they hadn't been before.

If he was to trust that Donald, either truly via impulse or for a reason he hadn't been inclined to explain, had made a wise decision worthy of his title, then he had to contemplate what that meant. Perhaps that the worlds were ready to be reconnected properly. The Light had never been stronger; finally they had a full cohort of well-trained wielders and protectors.

The worlds had been separate for millennia, endless lifetimes spent without knowing what their fully connected world would actually be. A diverse place, given the practicalities of having so many species. There were entire worlds that lacked the dominant species of their immediate neighbor. Plants and animals that had developed in isolation.

Perhaps the oceans being reconnected first was a blessing; between Triton, Calypso and potentially the Greek god Poseidon, they had allies that could assist in managing the integration.

Well. He was assuming Calypso, based entirely on Donald's own indication she had assisted in this part. But she was more of a goddess of chaos and destruction than one of order or control; it may do better

not to include her in any long term plans.

He eyed the puddle again, then gently prodded it with the barest hint of magic. Just to see.

There was no hint of Donald within it. There ought to be. The spell had been only a few hours ago, at most. He'd seen it. He knew the spell had affected *this* water, freezing it solid without it being as cold as it should have been.

And yet, nothing. It was just water.

Fascinating. He was aware Donald had no magical core, and thus no personal signature, but it was strange to realize that it resulted in no signature at all. Or one that was impossible to tell apart from the natural element itself. He would never know a spell had been cast by him had he not seen it.

How many other spells had Donald worked that Yen Sid was unaware of? He'd assumed he only did the minimum to accomplish his role, but if there was no magical signature left behind, he couldn't know unless he witnessed it directly.

In front of them, the circle glowed brighter, and Donald's eyes briefly opened. They were glowing a pure, unfiltered white. Then they closed, and the spell increased in power again. And again. And again, each time just as perfectly balanced as the last.

Yen Sid felt foolish, for not realizing there was so much going on. Donald may prefer his secrecy, but he didn't seem the subtle type. The evidence had clearly been there, had Yen Sid bothered to look deeper than the surface.

Because this spell was a masterpiece. He could admit it, seeing it in action. Yen Sid rarely bothered with the more complex spells; simple ones often had what he needed. Writing new spells was a delicate process, where any wrong point could negate the entire thing. Utilizing other scholars' work to create new spells, or combine into hardier effects, was the tried and true method of creation.

This spell circle was a custom creation, symbols he'd never seen and balanced in a way he didn't know that he had ever seen.

He looked out to the desert. Nothing moved, but in the far distance there was the faintest gleam. Not a light, a reflection from the glowing circle. A person? It was far too low to be eyes, but perhaps a boot or zipper.

No. No, it was an *animal.* A small desert lizard, blinking at them before scuttling off back under the sands, like it had always been there.

And perhaps it had. Or, perhaps, it had been *meant* to be there, and had just now been awoken.

Quadratum

Donald had the briefest moment, before the spell took full effect, where something whispered, ‘ *I thought he would leap in…’*

He couldn’t say for sure if it was his own, or someone else in the circle, but then the stars were flowing down to his hands and he could no longer spare any part of his mind to anything that wasn’t keeping the flow steady and controlled. No different from piloting a ship; keep it level, consistent speed, steady as she goes.

The stars felt old. Possibly ancient, but Donald didn’t have the proper scope for the ages of nebulas and planets. But they were interested. Active. They pressed near, curious; he hardly had to *reach* for any power because it was just *there,* eager to see what he would do with it.

Galactic travel was already rare in this area. Someone attempting to use the waves and pulls of gravity and space was an entirely *new* phenomenon. And to things that are old, possibly ancient, novelty was the greatest thing of all.

They pressed, and he allowed the waves to push them further, and further, until the circle was no longer sitting on the desert floor but hovering above it, too large to properly sit, and they opened their many eyes and *Saw.*

When it had been just himself, Lena and Magica, he’d allowed everyone to communicate. Or, rather, he’d allowed himself to focus on who was speaking at the time, so it felt like a conversation.

Now, though, he could already feel the strain of this much power, even with the Cabs holding firm as the guiding light and steady breeze

he needed to keep on track. This many hands, and none of them knew what he was attempting to do- he couldn't afford to try and differentiate between voices and thoughts. They were all a jumble anyway; of *Sora* and *the King?* and so on.

This part was at least somewhat routine. Find the anomalous magical signature. Follow the trail. Find the source of it.

In this case, half the people *in* the circle had traces of the spell on them, which made it easier to identify (though he worried it might be Keyblade magic until he was able to spot some of it on who he assumed was Goofy). Then came the interesting part.

Because that trail of magic, already worn thin by time and getting thinner by the minute, was *everywhere.* It was on all of them. It trailed across half the desert they had started in. It wandered here and there into the cosmos, likely settling on the other worlds they'd all been scattered to.

And they had no way to know which trail might be the right one. If they followed on, and it turned out to be another, would it fade further due to their attention? Or get lost in the chaos?

It was too risky to wait it out and check one at a time

Thankfully, they were not One, but Many.

They all scattered at his direction, no longer holding hands but tethered like a safety line, stretching to follow every wispy trail of magic too fragile to touch, and Donald was hopeful. They had everyone that had been involved, plus some; one trail wouldn't be leftover from when Sora had gone on his rescues. One trail amongst many would have to lead where he was *now.*

He stayed in the center, because someone needed to tether them to the circle, to guide them back to safety and ensure that their energy continued flowing as needed. It was a nearly devastating amount of power, just beyond his reach. It would take so little to take proper hold.

But not yet, not now. He could still hope.

He felt every pair of eyes shift farther and farther out, gaining speed as their confidence grew, and a dozen voices silently echoed across the universe.

‘Sora?’

‘Sora, time to come on home!’

‘Come on, how can we be twins if you’re not around, huh?’

‘I still owe you thanks for protecting me so long!’

‘We haven’t even gotten to meet yet!’

Their voices became a song, blending with the underflow of chatter from stars and asteroids humming by. He could feel echoes back.

“Sora’s missing?”

“We’ll look for him!”

“Oh, I do hope he’s alright!”

Voices and voices and voices, people he’d met and befriended across a universe of disconnected worlds, all brought together in a spider’s web of friendships and interconnected hearts. Sora would be pleased to know he was loved by so many.

When they found him.

It was when, not if. Donald would accept nothing less.

One by one they ruled out trails, until it was just three left, the others returning to the center with heavy hearts but expectation in their minds; they’d known most of the paths would be wrong. They’d been ruled out. These three *had* to be right.

But.

But Donald hadn’t searched directly. The Cabs had stayed with him, helping him keep centered. They had two extra people, but there would be two extra paths; one for him, and one from Kairi, who had nearly been lost twice.

There had to be one more path. One more strand of the web they’d overlooked.

He moved. And suddenly the full weight of the people he was guiding, the sheer *power* he was holding back by force of will, it made him *stagger.* All at once, it was the weight of the galaxy on his shoulders, and he held it in a shaking weak grip.

He couldn't let go. Couldn't afford to drop it for even an instant; he didn't know what the consequences of failure would be because nobody in recorded history had been so colossally *stupid* and *arrogant* as to try and command the cosmos.

Not command. Sail. He wasn't barking orders to a force that had no reason to listen, he was a *sailor,* and this was another sea. He wasn't directing the power, he was using the power to direct himself.

The weight on his spine became a thrashing wave to ride out, and the power flowed into the spell and lent extra energy, made everything clearer and brighter.

And with that boost, he saw it. The faintest, gossamer thread of light, trailing away from all the others, nearly invisible amongst the stronger powers around it. A path they hadn't looked at yet.

Of course, he thought with some amusement, of course it would be the very last one.

The hands that had returned turned to a tether, to guide him back, and he stepped into the air.

Each step was an aching one. The storm raged, the ship wavered, he could barely handle the sheer volume of it all, even as the others one

by one returned to the circle, strengthening the path backwards as he went ever further.

'Donald, is this safe?'

It had to be. He didn't know that the path would still be visible if they stopped to try again.

He gently pulled in more power. Only a little, a small trickle on top of what they already had. It still felt like the weight of the universe in his hands. The steering yoke jerked, the ropes slid and burned against his palms.

He held steady.

The thread continued on and on and *on,* spiraling here and there in odd patterns. He stopped.

He was reminded of something floating in the water, flitting back and forth in an incomprehensible way until you had the right angle to see it was a jellyfish, or a string, or a fish swimming in the current.

Well. If he just needed *perspective*…

They'd been told he was in a different world. Neither light nor dark. A fictional world.

Donald reached back and back and back, where he'd laid the last symbols, hard to spot amongst the others. Intentionally disguised in

the complexity.

Now he added them to the flow; a portal. Not home. They didn't need to go that far.

To the space between spaces, the gap between dimensions. The true Nothing. An outside perspective to see where this path actually went.

Donald barely felt in control. His grip was tight, but this ship was too large to sail, surely he couldn't hold it on course, surely, surely-

He had to. There was no other choice.

They needed to find Sora. He'd promised.

He Stepped Back.

And back.

And back.

And back.

In the palm of his hands, he held the worlds. A swirling vortex of life and light and darkness, while Donald's feet drifted in currents of Nothing that pulled at his feathers. No more than a gentle tug, nothing that could trip him up, but noticeable because it was familiar.

Darkness. Nothing. Void.

He ignored it.

There was a tug in his heart, from the anchor line. He stroked it gently, then focused on his task.

The outside was fascinating, but he couldn't focus on that. If he let himself think of what he was looking at, he would get overwhelmed. He would lose *himself*.

In the world, the gossamer thread twirled and twisted, but while from inside he couldn't see the pattern to it, here it was clear. A tangle that from here he could see was something else. A pinprick of light at the end of the endless strand. It didn't go anywhere. It didn't lead to anything. It just ended, in what looked to be the middle of nothing. Nowhere.

Except from here, it vanished into the edge. There was no real edge of the universe, except that there was, the entirety of it encased in a weak bubble that trembled where he held it, like the membrane could burst at any moment. Too many breaches, too many breaks into the beyond, and it left the entirety of the inside vulnerable.

A shame. If he knew how, maybe he could fix it. Strengthen the edges and barriers that had taken so much damage.

But right now, he focused on where the light vanished into the edge.

‘Is that it?’

‘Sora?’

He peered closer.

The light simply vanished into nothing. Not the Void Donald stood in, but genuinely into thin air. Nowhere he could currently see.

A fictional world, perhaps?

Well. Donald let himself shrink back down, one hand on that tiny pinprick, and as he came closer, he could feel it. The strand didn’t disappear into nothing.

There was a hole. A tiny, infinitely small hole, indescribably thin and nearly invisible even when he shrunk down further to peer at it.

The faint trail of magic vanished into it. It might be the only thing holding it open at all.

‘He’s in there?’

‘Or on the other side.’

‘Don? Can we get in there?’

Donald wasn't sure. But. It was a hole. An opening.

Liquids could change form to fill any space. He just needed to *be* the water.

It went against what he knew. Against how he kept his mind intact, kept himself in place where the elements wanted to press in.

He had an anchor line. It would have to be enough.

'I don't know what this will look like,' he warned. ' *You'll have to hold the line. If I tug on it?* Pull.'

A pause. And then a dozen hands, gripping tight, reached across the endless void to grip his arms, his shoulders, his hands.

'We'll make sure you get out safely,' their voices promised, overlapping and determined. ' *When you find him, we'll guide you home.'*

Those hands felt firm, the line strong and solid, and-

It would work. It would *have* to work.

Donald gathered everything about himself, his mind and his heart and everything he could hold, and dove into the small opening.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Drop by drop, he moved forward.

Patience. Patience.

Drip.

The tether was stretched thin, but it hadn't broken. Their voices were faint but there, whispering encouragement and hope back at him. Faint. Comforting.

He continued.

Drip.

There was nothing around him. No. It was Nothing. A distinct lack made solid. It wanted to claim him, keep him from progressing further. It didn't like things breaking this way, and the easiest way to remove a problem was to *remove* it.

This was probably how Sora had felt. Forced into Nothing because the

universe was cruel, uncaring, and would have allowed more of his loved ones to die for the sake of balance and the Light.

The altar of Light. It may be the ‘good’ element here but it sure had plenty of blood on its steps.

Drip.

Then-

An opening. Even smaller than the path, like it was trying to close before he could reach it.

Donald narrowed his eyes. Or at least thought he did; whatever he was seeing out of narrowed in concentrated determination.

He pressed further. Further. The walls pressed against him, restricting. Narrowing. Tightening.

He felt like toothpaste being pressed out of a tube. The pressure wasn’t keeping him *away* from the opening, now, it was pressing him forward, but trying to cut off his way back. Trying to trap him in here. Apparently the universe didn’t like people escaping this way any more than it had liked Sora breaking the rules of the Power of Waking.

Well, that was unfortunate.

For the universe.

The line held, a gossamer thread of light holding strong as steel, the hearts of everyone on the other end giving it the strength to be stretched to the absolute limit, and Donald came out the other side with a tiny, unbreakable thread of light connecting him back to his way home.

Thin. Impossibly thin. But it would not break. It would serve as their anchor line.

First, though, he needed to find Sora.

He looked up. And *up,* because he was in a city. Big city, almost entirely skyscrapers as far as the eye could see, billboards and people and *noise.* He was standing in a tucked away alley, gratefully, so he could take just a moment to get his bearings.

On the busy street across from him, people. Tons of them. All human, and all dressed in what he'd estimate was fairly modern clothing, which made sense for the landscape, but left him puzzled. This just looked like any other world. What made it different?

Maybe since it wasn't connected, it didn't have darkness. Or Heartless. Or any number of viable options.

Or maybe they were in another dimension altogether, nothing to do with any of this, and they just weren't in *Donald's* home dimension.

Well, nothing for it. He took a step forward, and his leg… shifted. Not like he lost his balance, or stumbled. Like the bone wasn't actually solid for a moment.

Bones were supposed to be solid. And he needed two legs, right? How many did he have right now? How many hands?

He tapped down his body, checking; two arms, two legs, everything mostly seemed in place, except that he was human at the moment, he thought. Pants instead of bare skin and feathers. Taller.

Fingers were weird looking; was he supposed to have claws? Did humans have claws? Surely they did. They were still predators, they probably had claws. And teeth, he knew they had teeth.

This body was weird. His disguise spell must have activated while he was acclimating, had to be, that was why he felt so off. Usually he had some input on it, tried to get a form similar enough to himself, but in a realm entirely populated by humans, there wasn't much leeway.

He'd expected to be pale, the white of his feathers reapplied as the pigment here, but his visible skin was a dusty brown, like it had been frequently exposed to the sun. There were small hairs along the backs of his arms, which looked… brownish? Huh. Brown seemed to be a common color, so that seemed right. His hair felt a bit longer than usual, but not terribly much, and was too short to see.

His mouth felt too full; was he usually so aware of teeth? Had he had teeth before? He was having trouble remembering if he'd ever had teeth before. Beaks didn't have teeth, but had he shapeshifted into a mammal before? Or a lizard? Some lizards had teeth.

He was having trouble focusing. He needed to find Sora.

The strand he had been following was gone, likely dissipated once it

had brought Sora here, but that was no matter at this point. Sora was loud, impossible to ignore, and powerful. He just needed enough visibility to see him.

He glanced at the busy street, with all the people that may notice something *off* about him. Wouldn't be the first time; Atlantica stuck out in his memory. Probably best to minimize exposure.

So instead, he raised an arm.

And even though this body wasn't technically his, and therefore everything he'd been carrying was back in the Keyblade Graveyard, the X-Transformer was there on his wrist like it had always been there. And with a flick, he was gliding up into the air, shooting past windows and balconies until he had landed on the rooftop of a building.

Not tall enough. He took a step, and another and another, as his legs seemed to firm up underneath him, remembering they needed to be solid and strong, where they needed to bend in order to move and how much weight the body they carried had.

And when he'd just reached the edge of the building, he leapt.

Rooftop jumping had been his first real taste of freedom. Of flying. It had been exhilaration and fear and sharp, cleansing wind in his feathers.

Hair, now. It tugged and pulled, as he leapt up another building and then ziplined higher still, the tug of the shield at once familiar and not, his current body straining to form the correct muscles when Donald himself wasn't quite sure he had it right.

How different could human arms be from a duck's anyway?

They should be longer, though. Longer than they usually were. He couldn't recall the exact proportions, but that- that felt about right. Any longer and they'd get in the way, how did humans handle *spines* like this anyway, he felt like he was strapped to a board and his balance was terrible-

He continued on, eyeing a particularly tall building. There did seem to be someone up there already, though, which- might be fine. Donald was probably breaking some law or another by being up here but he could hopefully bluff his way out of it.

He'd have to hope he was good enough. He had no idea how his magic might work here; the fact that he could no longer feel the stretch of containing it didn't bode well.

Somehow, he didn't think he was running low.

The man on the rooftop held up his hands to do… something, but Donald couldn't tell what, looking up at the moon.

He did glance at the moon, which seemed far larger than his own, and felt a tug. A *harsh* tug. His body didn't want to be down here, on the ground, running and jumping. It wanted to go *up*.

Tough luck, he growled to himself, and checked the tether again to confirm it was holding strong. This wasn't the time or place to lose himself.

Ghost Town

The person at the top of the building was wearing a hooded black cloak, and suddenly Donald wasn't too worried about laws preventing him from doing much of anything.

Not all of those cloaks belonged to the enemy , he reminded himself as he reached the rooftop, landing silently on the gravel; he was wearing boots, which was nice; usually only his PK uniform had those.

It didn't bode well that there was someone here with one of the damned cloaks, though. That meant that there were other ways to get to this world. Dimension? Place. Ways that Donald was willing to bet hadn't been his own method, which was potentially concerning. Also irritating; this wasn't exactly *easy*.

And if this *was* another enemy, some Organization member they'd missed, that meant they'd had access to Sora the entire time Donald's group had been trying to get themselves here.

He perched above the man on an AC unit, watching. He was holding his hands up towards the moon, shaped like a heart. Donald felt his face contort into a snarl, but he remained quiet, watching.

He really didn't like this.

The man put his hands down, slowly. Cautiously. He didn't turn around.

"I didn't expect you," he said. His voice was kinder than expected. Friendly, casual. He sounded normal, like someone you might meet on

the street. A pretty big change from the pretentiousness of Xehanort.

Donald's eyes narrowed. He was certain he had eyes, this time.

"You shouldn't trust prophecies," he said, more a shot in the dark than a real guess. Xehanort had talked about prophecies.

His voice sounded rougher than usual, like he'd been gargling gravel. He didn't bother repeating himself.

At that the man did turn around, shoulders raised in surprise. He looked up, and then he *leaned* back, way back, nearly over the railing.

Donald was less-than-confident his disguise was human accurate. That expression didn't look like a reaction to a normal looking person. Even one perched like a gargoyle above them in the dusky light of evening.

"Ah- you're not human," the man said. Donald's eyebrow rose slowly. The way that Della said made him look like Scrooge right when a plan came together.

"Nope."

Silence. The man considered him, face hidden entirely by the hood.

Donald felt something swish behind him, like a tail, like the one he'd had in the Pride Lands.

Humans didn't have tails. That- phooey, he'd *really* messed this up; his spell didn't usually need active thought to work smoothly, what was…

Oh. Right. He was still sailing. The spell was probably overloading trying to find a reasonable shape for him with that much magic running through him.

He should to try and correct that, Sora sure as hell wouldn't recognize him like this, but that would wait until he was done here.

He glanced out at the horizon. He saw some damage in the distance, like something large had crashed through downtown.

Ah, reminded him of home. Wrong skyline, but he could just about pretend.

There was an ocean far off in the distance, he could tell. But he really, *really* shouldn't touch that. Not unless he absolutely had to.

"You're here for Sora?" The man asked. Donald looked back down. The man clearly had no idea who Donald was, but he did know Sora. He knew he was here, that people were looking for him. But he had no idea what Donald's intentions were. If he was a friend or not. And Donald was in the same boat.

"He's here?" He asked instead of answering. "Big city. You sure about that?"

The hooded head tilted to one side.

“So you’re here for something else?” He asked, an edge under the curious tone. Donald grinned at him, widely, and made sure he exposed as many of the strange, strange teeth as he could.

He was fairly sure most humans only had one or two canine teeth. He’d felt at least seven.

The hooded man recoiled again, though he tried to hide his reaction.

“Maybe I’m just here to watch.” He suggested, tail flicking again. “Not everyday someone breaks the laws of reality. You think you’re the only one that noticed what he was doing? That kind of power sends out *ripples,* old man. There are a lot more things floating in the deep.”

He was winging it, sure, but he wanted to see how the man would react.

The man didn’t look pleased by that statement.

“Sora is far more powerful than the average Keyblade wielder,” the man observed, in a tone that might be a warning but was just shy of a serious emotion. “And he has a number of equally powerful friends.”

Hmm. Did he know who Donald was now, or was he trying to threaten Donald *with,* well, himself and their team?

Both were funny. He forced himself not to laugh. Then reconsidered and let out a wild cackle that he felt crackle and croak out of his throat. It sounded less like humor and more like some kind of mechanical malfunction. He… didn’t think he could entirely blame his voice for that one.

The man shifted uneasily.

"Are you one of those friends?" Donald asked. He wanted to leave and be done with this. But this was the highest building nearby and he really wanted to do this fast. Get in, find Sora, get out. He didn't know how long he could hold this form.

As if in response, he felt the weight of stars shift, slightly. The ones above him weren't quite the ones he was using, but they were similar, and *this* sky felt young. Less experienced. And curious. It wanted to reach down. Donald needed to resolve this.

"Just another observer," the man said, and he shrugged casually. "Just figured I could give you a warning, was all. Wouldn't do to get involved with something you didn't know all the details of. Could really ruin your day."

Donald laughed again, genuinely.

"My *day?* You're funny."

The man didn't seem to know what to say to that, and instead he-

Well.

He jumped off the roof.

Donald didn't bother rushing to the edge, but he did shift slowly closer, hopping down from his perch to glance over the edge. Too many times he'd seen someone do that, only to float back up or run down the side of the building or magic their way safely to the ground; if this guy couldn't do that, he probably would have heard *something,* right…?

Nothing. So the guy had used magic to survive the jump and wander off after.

Donald shrugged it off as a 'Later Issue,' and instead climbed to the edge of the roof, ignoring the small voice in the back of his head (that sounded like Uno) saying to *not* stand where a light breeze could blow him right off the edge.

He closed his eyes. Dug deep in his mind for the magical signature Sora left on everything, constantly, magic left behind like an imprint of his soul on everyone he met. It wasn't quite keyblade magic. Not totally, though it was certainly shaped by it. But it was *Sora,* and nobody else.

He found that presence in his mind, held it, and when he was certain he could find it again, he opened his eyes.

The city *glowed.*

There were streaks and piles and splatters of magic everywhere; Sora had been *busy.*

But it was certainly something to start with. The brightest glow was near the destruction he'd seen already, so he'd start there. Looked like a real battle had happened.

Wasn't this world supposed to be beyond Light and Dark? What had he been fighting?

Heartless. He'd been fighting Heartless.

Of course. Why wouldn't that be the issue? Not like they were supposed to be exclusive to the Kingdom Hearts dimension; he wasn't actually sure if he was still *in* that dimension or not anyway.

Whatever. Heartless destroyed meant Sora was around and moving, that was good. Now he just needed to-

"Ha!"

Donald dodged left, already thanking the stars or gods that Sora was so *loud,* before he processed that it wasn't Sora that had swung the blade.

Instead, a young woman glared at him, russet hair bound in two low pigtails with orange ribbon.

She *was* holding a keyblade though, and he wondered briefly if he'd been mistaken, if this was the source of the magic everywhere. But, no, that didn't seem quite right; the magic was similar, not the same. Older. Calmer.

He dodged again, then held up his hands, which shifted in a strange

way until he glared at them and they resolved into normal human hands. With claws.

She didn't have claws though, whoops. And his fingers seemed oddly long compared to hers, now that he was looking.

"Hey, hey, I'm not a Heartless!" He insisted when she seemed ready to go for a third blow. She paused, frowning, eyeing him up and down.

Thank the gods Heartless usually couldn't talk.

"You're not human," she said, eyebrows drawn low. "What are you?"

"Well, usually I'm a duck," Donald told her with a sheepish grin that didn't seem to help. "But I've got a shapeshifting spell on to help blend in. Guessing it's not very effective today?"

Something in her face softened, and she giggled.

"No! No, not really, mister, uh…?" She asked, leaning back. Her blade dropped slightly to a less aggressive pose, but she stayed in a ready position. He approved.

"Donald," he answered. He'd offer to shake her hand, but his hands seemed to weird her out, so he just waved.

She lit up.

“Oh! Wait, you said a *duck?* With a- a blue hat!” She declared, pointing at his head. He reached up, and sure enough, his hat had come through with him. Nice. It didn’t always.

“Yup, that’s me!”

“I know you!” She told him, smiling so brightly it could have blinded him. “You’re Sora’s friend!”

Donald took a breath, and smiled. Of course. Of *course* Sora had made a new friend.

“I’d like to think so!” He said cheerfully, and let his hands drop to his sides. She didn’t raise the blade again, so he relaxed. “Hoping we can get him home safe.”

Her face drooped, then. Just slightly.

“Oh! I, um- I’m sure he’ll be really excited to speak to you!” She said with enthusiasm as bright, and as fake, as a neon sign at night. “Here, do you want me to call him? I was on my way to meet up for dinner, but I saw you, and, well. I thought you might be another of those things.”

Donald didn’t think he looked like a Heartless, but in her defense, he probably didn’t look like anything else, either.

“That would be great. And what was your name?” He asked, settling down to sit on the edge of the rooftop. He for sure had some kind of tail, but refused to turn and look at it.

“I’m Strelitzia!” She told him, before taking out a phone to type. “You wouldn’t happen to know how his other friends are doing, do you? He’s been worried…”

“Everyone recovered fine; we’ve been worrying about him,” Donald returned, looking down at his wrist. The skin tone kept flickering, like clouds were passing overhead and making them look brighter, darker, brighter. “Kairi in particular; she’s a bit shaken.”

She hummed, but there was an odd note to it. He glanced back up at her. She was looking down at her phone, blinking rapidly.

“He’s, uh- he’s on his way. I didn’t say who you were, I thought it would be hard to explain over text…”

Donald nodded. There were some things that needed to be in person.

“You know, I haven’t been home in a really long time,” she said quietly. “Couldn’t, for the longest time, but now that I’m healed, I’m still just… waiting for the right moment. The Master of Masters said I’ll know when I can go back, but… it’s hard. Waiting. I liked having Sora here with me.”

Donald tensed, slightly, but she just seemed sad. Not threatening.

Then he considered her words. How people had *known* that things would end badly due to this kind of power abuse. Her keyblade.

“Who’s the Master of Masters?” He asked instead. She looked back up,

smiling gently.

“He was the greatest keyblade wielder of our time,” she said. “Which, I think, was a while ago. On your end. He saved my life, and brought me here to recover. I was… badly injured. Too much to stay where we were at the time.”

Donald didn’t like the sound of that.

“So you’re from the same place Sora is?”

“Well, not the same world, but close!” She agreed; he had to wonder if she knew other dimensions existed, but it didn't really matter for his next question.

“Want a ride back?” He asked, and watched her eyes go *wide*. “I can probably manage two.”

She stared at him.

“You- I don’t-” she stuttered, before falling silent, tugging on one of her pigtails, biting her lip. “I need to wait for the right moment, he said…”

Right moment. Prophecies. Donald bit back a sigh.

“Word of advice? If it’s not the right time, it won’t happen,” he said carefully. “That’s the thing about telling the future; it’s really better not to. Makes you second guess your choices.”

She blinked at him.

“But if the future is supposed to go one way…”

“Then it will. But tell me this; if he *hadn’t* told you to wait for a perfect moment, what would you have done differently?”

Strelitzia pursed her lips in thought.

“I wouldn’t have hesitated when you offered,” she said after a moment. “But otherwise, I don’t think I would have changed anything. Everything since he told me that has felt… natural.”

“See, that’s why you don’t tell people about prophecies!” He explained. “It’ll happen because it happened, or it won’t because it didn’t. You’re better off doing whatever you would do without thinking about it, and if it’s really the wrong time he can stop you.”

Because the only way that that future he’d predicted *wouldn’t* happen would be if she changed something. Which would only happen if she was reacting to a prophecy, because without that she would just follow her normal reasoning or impulses. The only reason to *tell* someone about a prophecy would be to change their behavior.

Or to make them too nervous to make a decision. Make them dependent on *your* decision instead.

“That doesn’t really make sense,” she admitted. He shrugged.

“Predicting the future usually doesn’t,” he told her brightly, then glanced around. “So, where are we, anyway?”

“Oh! Welcome to Quadratum!”

“I don’t know why he’s taking so long!” She stressed, pacing. “Sora’s not usually this late!”

“Maybe he ran into trouble,” Donald offered, tense himself. It had been a while since she’d texted him, and he was starting to wonder if she even *had.* Should he really trust her? He usually had a good sense for things like this, but he needed to remain wary.

On the other hand, if she was trying to trick him, that would still put him ahead on finding out what was happening here, and whatever *that* was probably still involved Sora…

“He’s on his way.”

Donald twitched, and turned to look at the newcomer landing on their rooftop. This was-

Wasn’t that the guy from the video game? From the toybox? What had his name been…

“Yozora!”

Yeah, that sounded right.

Strelitzia strode forward, looking pleased, but the newcomer, a man with silver hair and mismatched red and blue eyes, was staring right at Donald. He looked disturbed, if not downright enraged, and his hand twitched like he was about to draw a weapon.

Donald didn't bother moving. Nonchalance had a way of disarming people, and in this case it did seem to confuse him enough to delay hostilities.

"What *are* you?" He demanded, taking a step forward, while Strelitzia hopped out of his way with an affronted expression.

"I'm Donald," he answered blandly, running his fingers through his hair. He wondered what color it had ended up; he'd expected blond, but based on the tiny hairs on his arm that didn't seem right. Could the arm hair be a different color than head hair? Was that normal for humans? Not that he looked like a normal human at the moment…

"That… doesn't answer my question."

"Then you should ask a politer one."

"Yozora! This is Sora's *friend* Donald!" Strelitzia exclaimed, sliding forward so she could glare into his face. "Remember? He talks about them all the time!"

He looked at her with something harsher than pity, but not by much.

“Sora’s losing memories by the day,” he told her, eyes still partially on Donald. “We can’t trust them.”

Losing memories?

Donald stood straight, and was briefly startled to realize he was taller than both of the people in front of him. Children. They were adults but they were so very, very young despite that.

He felt too big for his skin.

“If he’s losing memories,” Donald said, and his voice felt too loud for this place, “then we should be *hurrying* to get him home before they unravel further. There’s no need for him to go through that *twice.”*

Yozora frowned at him, but Strelitzia nodded, eyes lighting with recognition and determination.

“You *do* know him!” She declared, half to her companion. “He said it had happened another time, Yozora, that’s proof!”

“It’s proof he knows him, not that he’s a *friend-”*

Donald was tired of this conversation, and tired of waiting. He’d been patient, assuming that it would be better not to make too much of a fuss while he still didn’t know quite where he was (it looked like Tokyolk, which was… strange), but now? With there being a time crunch?

No more waiting.

He turned to face the edge of the building, ignoring the squabbling behind him, and opened his mouth.

“SORA! LET’S GET A MOVE ON, WE’VE GOT PEOPLE WAITING!”

Silence. And then, distantly-

“ *Donald?!”*

Losing Your Way on Memory Lane

Sora froze at the edge of the roof, eyes *wide,* and Donald winced. Yeah, he didn't look normal. Or safe. Or close enough to himself to even trust.

"Uh… Donald?" Sora asked, edging a bit closer, and eyeing the other two with a frown. "That's you…?"

"In the- no, not the flesh. I'm actually just magically projecting myself here," he said absently, trying to think quickly. "This is just my mind and a bunch of magic trying to make me look… human. Ish. Not really working, though."

Sora snorted, relaxing as soon as the first words came out of his mouth.

And Della wondered why he liked his voice. Nothing confirmed his identity faster.

"Nope! You look like a person was poured into a jello mold. Like, three molds. And then all stuck together. You're really tall!" Sora declared, coming closer and yeah, no, Donald was sure he was too tall. Him being a *bit* taller than Sora while in a humanoid form made some sense, Sora was still a teenager after all, but he was pretty sure he was nearly double the kid's height right now.

Gods but it was good to see Sora in person. He felt like he could breathe again.

"The jello mold is our transformation disguise spell," he chuckled.

“And the jello is, well. Me.”

“So if I poke you, you’d wobble?” Sora asked, stepping closer to peer at him. "You kinda look wobbly!"

Donald laughed.

"It's the *spine,* more than anything. How do humans walk like this?!" He whined comically, and now Sora was laughing.

"You're barely walking as it is! I don't think you can blame our backs for that, Donald, you're like ten feet tall!"

"Hey, I got all the way here, didn't I? I can walk just fine!"

Probably. He wasn't sure he was the same shape he'd been when he started, honestly, but so long as nobody surprised him, he was pretty sure he could keep *this* shape. Whatever it was.

"Sure you did. Huh," Sora said, looking up at the top of his head with surprise. "I kinda expected you to have blond hair."

"Why, what color do I have?" Donald asked, tilting his head bakc like he'd be able to see it. Maybe he could just see the edges of the hair against his brow...?

"It's red! Like *really* red, you and Axel would kinda match now!"

Well wasn't that a funny picture. Panchito would be disappointed to have missed it.

Strelitzia bounced over to Sora, beaming.

“Sora! Your friend is here to get you home!”

Here Sora frowned, crossing his arms slowly. His head tilted to one side.

Donald breathed out carefully. Missing memories. Right. It was always something, wasn't it?

Like the world felt the need to hard reset Sora's entire existence every few months, and the poor kid just had to redo all of his learning and growth all over again.

“You should get back to Destiny Islands,” he said clearly. “Your friends are waiting for you back home. Kairi and Riku said they’d start setting up a new room for you when you get home; they’ve started ones for Roxas and Xion already. Unless you’d prefer Twilight Town? It’s easy enough to travel between them now.”

With every word, Sora’s frown deepened.

“Right… the islands…” he said, staring into the middle distance. “They were… small. But nice, right? I grew up there, but I wanted to leave…”

“They are small. And nice. There’s an enormous tree in the middle of one, with an entire giant treehouse built around it. And a cave under a waterfall. There are paupu fruit trees around; did you ever share one with Riku and Kairi?”

“Paupu fruit,” he said. “Yeah… yeah! We did, when we got back from defeating Organization XIII! We… we didn’t want to be separated again. I- Donald?”

Strelitzia sighed, equally pleased and sad. Yozora huffed.

“Can we go? I- I know I should stay to help, but-”

“Sora, you’ve done plenty. And you’re probably going to do plenty more later, goodness knows you won’t stop even if I ask,” Donald told him, bending down to reassure him, “You can *take a break.* You can’t keep giving when you’ve got nothing left, kid. So yes, I’ll get you home. And we’ll find a safer way back, when you’ve recovered, alright?”

“I- you mean, you won’t go back to your home?”

Danger. Danger.

“I’ll be back around, don’t you worry. Haven’t left you yet, have I?”

Sora nodded. He brightened a lot, actually.

“No, you haven’t!” He agreed, before looking at Strelitzia. “Are you

coming with us?”

Donald chuckled. Just like that. As always.

“I… I’m supposed to wait for the right moment, Sora,” she whispered, glancing at Yozora, who continued frowning. "I- it's foretold..."

“How do you know this isn’t?” Sora asked, head tilting slightly to one side. Strelitzia blinked at him.

“Well, I… I guess I just thought I would know,” she admitted, rubbing her arm. Donald was starting to worry this would take them a while. Which, he did understand. She likely had a life built up here, leaving to go back ‘home’ probably wasn’t an easy decision.

It was just an issue because he was on a timer, and he wasn’t sure how much more time was on it.

He only had four limbs. That seemed right. Plus the tail; that didn’t count, did it? There seemed to only be one tail. It was just moving fairly quickly.

They kept discussing. He focused on the lifeline, making sure it was still solid and bright. The others couldn’t see it, but he refrained from tugging on it or doing anything too stupid; no need to draw attention to where it led *out*.

His body ached. Strained, and hurt, but he wasn't sure where the pain was leading him. It didn't feel like he was going to lose the spell, the strain of keeping it together tugging at his soul. It felt far more like his body wanted to *change,* and he was already well and far enough away

from normal for his tastes. He didn't know what would happen if he lost his grip.

“I… okay. Yes, I’ll go!” Strelitzia declared, and Donald tuned back in. She looked determined and fierce now, no longer full of doubt. Behind her, Yozora looked blandly disinterested. “I want to find my brother!”

Okay Donald had *clearly* missed something, but he would have to ask later; for now, he nodded.

“Do you both need time to prepare?” He asked; the magical strain was starting to make his voice warp further. “Anything you need to bring back with you?”

“I’ve got my stuff; always carry it with me, just in case!” Sora answered cheerfully. Donald wanted desperately for the kid to have a safe space to keep his things. Poor kid hadn’t had a stable home in, what, years now? He hadn’t been on Destiny Islands long enough to resettle, but maybe this time…

“No.” Strelitzia said. “I don’t.”

Odd. Donald eyed her, but she looked stubborn about it.

“You don’t want your clothes? Or decorations? Collections?” Sora asked, concern in every expression. She shook her head.

“I don’t think they’ll actually last going through,” she admitted. “And I don’t want to waste any more time. Besides,” she added, glancing at Donald. “I think he’d prefer we get moving faster. That spell is really not a very good disguise!”

“It’s usually better,” Donald defended himself with a laugh, before nodding. “If you’re sure. Nobody to say goodbye to?”

“Only Yozora.”

“Then follow me.”

He led the way back, hopping across rooftops in a zig-zagging path, keeping a slow, steady pace so that the three could talk behind him and trying not to eavesdrop too much. Mostly it seemed to be Strelitzia trying to convince Yozora to come with them.

“You came all the way here to find me?” Sora asked, sliding closer as they walked. Donald glanced over at him with a smile that he hoped wasn’t as awkward as it felt on his face.

“Course I did. Mind you, everyone’s been looking; they’re waiting on the other side with the rope.”

“Yeah?”

“Sora, all of us want you home and safe.” He said clearly. “We weren’t going to let you stay lost; it just took us a while to figure out where you were.”

“It’s just- it’s been months here. I think. So I started to wonder,” he admitted. Donald took a startled breath.

“Time goes slower in the dimension missing a person,” he said absently from memory.

“Huh?”

“Time, it- it’s been a few weeks, for us,” he explained. “We didn’t like it being *that* long, but- kid, I’m sorry it took us so long to get here.”

“Oh…” Sora said, sounding surprised, but pleased. His entire demeanor relaxed, arms crossing behind his head. “Well, you probably had to look really hard, I guess that isn’t so bad!”

“That and everyone kept me on *bedrest,”* Donald grumbled. “Might have been faster if I wasn’t stuck.”

“Wait, why were you on bedrest? You weren't hurt after I… disappeared, were you?”

Oops. Sora didn’t need to know- no. Wait. He *could* say this.

“Merlin thought I needed to heal properly after all of the, well, everything. José and Panchito agreed, and the others were… concerned I would bite off more than I could chew. Yen Sid, mostly.”

“So, what, you had to convince him that your plan would work?” Sora asked, glancing up and that was so *strange,* being so tall. How did these people stand looking down at everyone all the time?

“Ha! No, that probably would have taken *longer.”* Donald laughed

darkly. “Nah, we snuck out as soon as I finished writing the spell.”

Sora stumbled. Behind them, the chatter went quiet.

“You *what?!”* He demanded, delighted. Donald grinned back at him, unrepentant.

“Snuck out. Stole a Gummi ship, found your *entire* family in the hold stowing away by the way, Roxas and Xion are going to be trouble makers, I swear- anyway, got to the Keyblade Graveyard, and then the other three, Aqua, Ventus and Terra, they showed up to help. *Then* Yen Sid and the fairies showed up with Merlin and Mickey, only then half of them joined us too, so-”

“So literally everyone I know is sitting in the Keyblade Graveyard with Master Yen Sid glaring at them?” Sora finished, grinning ear to ear. Strelitzia made an odd sound, possibly at the term ‘keyblade graveyard,’ which Donald had no idea if she had known about before this moment. It sounded like she was older than all of them.

“Basically, yeah.” He confirmed. “Didn’t have a chance to swing over to Radiant Gardens, but rest assured they would have helped if I had.”

“Aww, you didn’t grab Dagobert or the triplets to round it out?” Sora teased. “You have so *many* kids, you sure those ones aren’t yours?”

“Positive. They look *just* like them though, do you know how confusing that was when we went into the shop the first time?!”

Sora continued laughing.

“Wait, wait, so who would Dagobert be?”

“My uncle Scrooge; he even used to have that *exact* coat, it is disturbing, Sora!” Donald continued, trying not to laugh himself. “I’m just waiting to see a copy of my sister running around, that would take the cake.”

“Wait, so Katrien isn’t her twin?”

“Nope, but I dated someone that could be.”

“Ew!”

“What?”

“You dating!” Sora exclaimed, sticking out his tongue. “Gross!”

“Sora, I’m dating Panchito and José right *now,”* he pointed out. Sora groaned more.

“I don’t want to think about it!”

“Why shouldn’t Donald date, er, those two?” Strelitzia asked, stepping forward to walk next to them. “Is there something wrong with them?”

“What? No. Or, probably not, I just met them but they seem… fine,”

Sora stuttered, startled by the question. “It’s just gross thinking about Donald *dating.* He’s like my dad or something!”

Donald stumbled.

Dad.

Dad???

DAD.

He’d never been called that. Ever. He was always Uncle Donald. *Always.*

He had a baby on the way, but it hadn’t- he hadn’t really thought about the fact that he’d have a different title.

It didn’t matter; the boys *were* his kids, same as Sora and the girls, and- well. There were a lot. But it felt different.

Sora probably didn’t mean it that way. He should-

Except Sora was watching him from the corner of his eye. He looked anxious. He was hiding it well, but Donald knew him.

“Well, speaking from experience,” Donald drawled, grinning wider, “your parents dating should *always* gross you out! Or embarrass you!”

Sora relaxed, before his eyes went wide with realization.

“Wait-”

“Don’t worry, Sora!” Donald crowed, every inch Paperinik’s smug grin, “We’ll get you caught up!”

“No, no, have mercy, I’m fine!”

“Gonna go on dates and hold hands around you and be ooey gooey and obnoxious-”

“Can’t you just offer to go to my ball games or something?!”

“We’ll do that too!”

He wished he could, anyway. No matter how he felt, though, they had to go home. And Sora couldn’t go with them.

“This is it?” Sora asked, poking the air round where the line disappeared. Donald twitched; he could feel it through said line, and it was odd, to say the least.

“This isn’t like the doors between worlds thing,” Donald said as he settled in to try and open the space back up. “You’re not supposed to be able to find it.”

As he spoke, he got hold of the line and started gently pulling on it, trying to loosen the gap up so they could get back through. It had closed up like a wound over the tether, a piercing in the barrier between realities. Now he just had to force that back into something large enough for three people.

Well, two people and him.

“Donald, are you supposed to be glowing?”

“Told you,” he muttered, focused on his task, “I’m not really here.”

Behind them, movement. Donald stopped what he was doing, though it desperately hurt to stop (he wanted to be *home,* he wanted to be *done,* and the edges of the opening felt as sharp as razors), and turned to look.

Heartless. Wonderful. Probably drawn in by their presence. Or the portal itself? But why? They were already on the other side, and there was Nothing in between.

Maybe they wanted to open that pathway further?

The three kids shifted to fight, blades drawn. Two keyblades, and Yozora’s with a strange glowing orange edge.

Super cool. Dewey would love one.

Donald didn't really have the patience for this, though, and he could feel how little control he actually had right now fading further. Did he even still have skin?

They were in an alley. A bottleneck, effectively, and nothing was appearing behind him.

So he stepped forward, and again, blocking the trio with-

Well, apparently he had wings again; this was getting out of hand. They needed to *go.*

"I don't think so," he said, and his voice seemed to echo through the alley. He raised a hand.

What attack would the stars prefer, he thought with a grimly amused snort of laughter, and the stars answered with what every element seemed to favor for a fight: *Fire* .

The flames roared from his hands in a wall that covered every inch of the alley, from brick to brick, nearly two stories tall. They weren't a spell so much as a *summons* of light and heat, and seemed to flick with life at the center as it blazed through the alleyway, taking out the Heartless and most of the strewn around garbage in one swoop that smelled of gasoline and, strangely, fruit.

His mouth tasted like rum and rotting berries.

"We could have handled that with less drama," Yozora snipped, clearly disappointed. Donald didn't bother looking at him; he was trying to put his hands back together.

“We really don’t have time for that,” he grumbled, and stepped back to the portal.

“Donald…?” Sora said quietly; *him,* Donald looked over at.

Sora looked worried. And wary.

“Hey, can you tell me your kids names again?” He asked, and Donald paused.

Identity check. A good call on Sora’s part, even if he had waited. The issue was just that he couldn’t remember if he’d told Sora *every* name. Of course the kid would choose *that* question; couldn’t he just ask Donald’s social security number instead?

“April, May, and June are Daisy’s nieces that call me uncle, Huey, Dewey and Louie are my actual nephews that I raised, Webby is my adoptive niece, I have an egg waiting at home we haven’t picked a name for yet, I’m a godparent for Yakko, Wakko, Dot, Tripp-”

“Okay, okay, just wanted to be sure!” Sora cut him off, waving his hands. Donald grinned at him.

“Then there’s you,” he added, because he could do that, Sora had *said* it, and got to watch Sora’s face light up in surprise. “Probably the others too, since *you’re* a triplet now.”

“I am?” Sora asked, before he blinked. “Oh, I *am!* You’ve got a third set of us now! Three sets of three!”

“Maybe that’ll make me lucky,” Donald quipped, while Strelitzia giggled. Yozora rolled his eyes, and turned his back on them, watching the alleyway opening with a determined expression.

“I’ll protect it while you’re going through,” he swore, looking around them with a critical eye. Strelitzia nodded, but she looked disappointed.

“Last chance to come with,” Donald bit out, reaching back out to find the edges of the opening and beginning to pull.

“I’ll find my own way. But thanks.”

So be it. Donald got a grip and opened it *wide.*

Unlike before, he could actually see the strange warbling Nothing in the middle. Not dark, because dark was a thing. Not quite like the Realm *of* Darkness either, that had Become something despite desperately wanting not to be. This was true Nothing.

He didn’t want to push it long enough to change that; who knew what it would Be if they did?

“Alright, grab my hands,” he said, and Sora made a strange noise.

“Which ones?”

He had no idea how many he had right now.

"Whichever aren't busy," he snarked, and Sora laughed. There was a tight grip on one hand, and a tentative one on the other. He squeezed both, and felt them move to hold each others behind him.

Wait, no, he could *see* them- how many eyes did he have right now?

Didn't matter, time to go.

"Goodbye, Yozora. Thanks for the help," Sora groused, while Strelitzia sniffled a more emotional goodbye. Donald nodded in gratitude, aware his neck probably wasn't supposed to bend like that, and grateful beyond belief that Sora believed him when he'd said who he was. He really didn't look like himself right now.

Or anyone else, for that matter.

Then they were stepping into the opening, and Donald curled around the two children in his care, blocking every part of them with his body so only he was actually exposed to the Nothing, and stepped properly inside. Behind them, the second they were no longer touching the other edge, it began to close up.

Then came the hard part of slowly, slowly, shifting themselves back through.

It was agonizing in a strange way. There was no pain, no real effort, but it was also the most exhausting thing Donald had done in some time. Each step felt like it was fighting him. Before it had simply been a narrow space. Now it was worse.

Likely because he was carrying cargo with him. But the universe was just going to have to suck it up, because he wasn't leaving them behind.

He pressed on. In his grip, the kids shifted together; if they spoke, he couldn't tell.

On and on, with nothing to see except the glowing line leading them back home. He gripped it tight, hand over hand, and continued dragging them forward.

With each step he could feel the pull of the anchor rope get stronger; they were starting to tug them back. Each step gradually got easier, after what he assumed had been the halfway point.

Now it was getting easier, with the Nothing pressing them *out* instead of in. Now he could start to hear whispers and muttering, feel the individual hands and hearts that composed their anchor.

Now he felt the stars around him and the *weight* of it. He'd- he'd almost forgotten. That they were heavy. That they *should* be heavy. He should struggle to contain them.

He needed to remember that. The alternative wasn't worth contemplating.

Sora?

Donald? Are you safe?

Sora! Welcome back!

They overlapped each other, relief and joy and excitement, as Donald finally saw the stars beyond the Nothing, and pulled them back out into the world.

They shot out of the opening like a bullet, and he felt it seal closed behind him, the pressure forcing them out *fast.* It was a gasp of air even though they were in space, the sheer release of energy cooped up and tied down for the entire rescue.

How long had he been in there?

How many days had it been at home?

The opening was gone, and their abrupt exit meant they were nowhere near where it had been; an effective way of making sure nobody could try that one again, he supposed, as he resettled his grip on his two passengers and started the much shorter journey back home.

Over worlds and skies, and voices calling back as they passed.

Sora! Oh, you're back!

Come visit soon!

I'm glad they found you!

Love and affection and friendship washed over them in waves. In his hands, he felt Sora move, but he couldn't tell to what end.

The anchor line was hands gripping and voices calling, hearts crying out in joy.

They landed. Donald set his passengers down in the center before rejoining his body on the edge, and finally reopened his eyes. They were crusted with salt and sand.

In front of him, there was a shadowy monster in the center of the circle. It was holding a white cloak.

Donald bit back a sigh, because it never was easy, was it, and shifted so he was kneeling, never releasing the hands he held. He leaned in towards the center of the circle; they weren't separated by a spell, but the creature didn't try to get any closer. It seemed confused, lost. Tired.

Donald could relate.

"Sora," he said clearly, "I know you didn't like me being taller than you, but nine feet is a bit much, don't you think? You're going to smack your head on the ceiling!"

The creature twisted to look at him, and its eyes looked desperate and dark. He maintained eye contact.

"You look like your Rage form," he said, though it really wasn't that close; the Rage form was dark and shadowy, sure, but it was also Sora-shaped. This looked like, well.

Like Donald had felt in Quadratum. Had he really looked so terribly strange? The being in front of him was more than odd, it was *eldritch*.

The being twitched, and the eyes blinked. When they opened again, they were blue.

The others quickly got the memo.

“Yeah, Sora, we’re the same height!” Roxas called out loudly, and Sora turned to look at him. The face was starting to melt into Sora’s jawline, and the eyes shifted to sit level with each other above it.

“How are you gonna climb trees without feet? We said we’d get to the top of the one on the island this year!” Riku added, and then they were *all* off, talking about places to go and things to see, things Sora should remember, and Donald watched him rapidly start shifting.

With each person chiming in about something Sora had said, or done, he got closer to himself, though there was a brief moment where his head had fully formed, hair and all, but was still gangling at ten feet tall. That was oddly more disturbing than the shadow monster had been.

He moved his attention to the cloak.

“Strelitzia?” he called carefully, trying not to interrupt the others. “You’re going to have to get up. You can’t look for your brother as a cloak.”

“Who is this?” Panchito whispered into his ear, leaning close; Donald relished the contact for a moment; he had no idea how long it had been since he’d been in his own body, but the touch felt amazingly warm.

“A friend Sora made on the other side; she’s from here, and she wants to find her brother,” he replied, and Panchito nodded, getting with the program immediately.

“Yes, you should have feet, for walking!” he said cheerfully, and the cloak began to shift in Sora’s arms; Sora had shrunk down to his normal height, and looked down in delight as the cloak moved.

“Strelitzia!” He said, in a hissing croak. “We made it! I told you I would introduce you to all my friends, didn’t I?”

The cloak fluttered out of his arms, but didn’t hit the ground; it seemed to have *someone* in it, hidden by the folds of fabric.

Sora kept talking, even as he reformed into himself, while the cloak shifted and rippled, until hands reached out from within and tossed the hood back. Strelitzia’s smiling face peered out, hair materializing as the hood moved, and Sora finished his own transformation looking into her eyes.

They both laughed, and then it was wet laughter veering towards tears and Donald let go of the hands he held to end the spell before someone did something stupid to break something; the circle shattered into light, the outer barrier melting away.

The gaggle of keyblade wielders wasted no time in tackling Sora into a many limbed group hug. Strelitzia didn’t manage to escape in time, but that didn’t seem to bother her in the slightest, giggling through tears with something like awe in her eyes as she looked at them.

Donald waited until a small opening had formed in the group, probably to let Sora breathe, before he dove in himself, squeezing hard enough that he worried he might break the kid.

“Hey, hey, Donald! You already saw me!”

“Not with my actual eyes, now hush! I’m having a moment!”

Panchito was laughing behind them, coming up close enough Donald could feel his warmth. Around them, he could sense José carefully wiping the circle markings away, leaving no trace of his presence.

Benefit of elemental magic: it left very little magical residue once the spell was completed. Harder to trace, harder to replicate. Nobody would be able to repeat what they had done.

Goofy got in, and Mickey was there too, now, and Donald hoped with all he had that Sora hadn't noticed he hadn't been in the circle to begin with. He didn't think he needed to know quite yet; maybe he wouldn't care, they weren't particularly close, but if he *did,* he deserved to find out somewhere calmer instead of ruining this moment.

Speaking of ruining the moment though.

Donald looked around to find José, and grabbed Panchito's hand carefully, taking a single step away from the massive hug that was showing no signs of moving. Pancho's hand was so *warm,* or was it Donald that was so cold?

He was always cold, though. This felt… moreso.

"You know how you asked me to tell you when I'm hurt or need help?" he asked, leaning back so he was mostly resting his weight on Panchito. They both nodded, and José already looked worried.

That was fair.

"I am about to faint." And as he spoke, he finally, *finally,* let the stars

go and docked the ship.

True to his word, he was out before he could hit the ground.

He woke slowly, and thankfully with no dreams of stars, eager or not. His mouth tasted like morning breath, not rotting fruit, ash or salt.

There was a heavy feeling on his chest. Warm, grounding.

Feathered.

He opened his eyes long enough to see red, green, and a pile of fleshy humans beyond, and closed his eyes again. He thought he'd earned a bit of a lie-in, right?

He could feel the massive pile shift slightly, and slowed his breathing. He was very good at pretending to sleep, and whoever was moving around wasn't going to ruin his streak. Given the number of heads he'd counted, they may very well just be trying to find a more comfortable position anyway.

"Donal'," Panchito whispered. "I can tell you're awake."

Donald didn't react. No he wasn't, he was sleeping. Please let him sleep.

Panchito sighed, tracing a hand gently over Donald's ribcage.

“You should eat.”

“Not hungry. Lemme sleep,” he mumbled, shoving his head further into whatever it was lying on. Could be someone’s chest. Could be a pillow.

“Sleeping people can’t talk,” someone else in the pile said. Sora, he thought.

“Snork. Mimimimi.”

A chorus of sleepy giggles erupted from around him, and Donald sighed, accepting that he wouldn’t be allowed to lay around anymore.

He started to sit up, only for several hands to shove him back down.

“Nope!” Kairi chirped, climbing out from her spot in the pile. “You just sit tight, we’ll get you something to eat!”

Several people left. Donald, still pressed down by who turned out to be José and Sora, couldn’t tell who had all been there, but could tell now that Mickey was lingering, that Goofy was sprawled still against his toes, and that he really was actually hungry.

“Don?”

Damn it Mick , Donald grumbled to himself, staring at the ceiling. *Did he really have to do this right now?*

“Yeah?”

Long silence. Long enough Donald actually did feel like he was going to fall back asleep.

Finally, Mickey sighed.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “For not listening to you.”

Donald shrugged.

“I didn’t say anything this time,” he replied, but it didn’t feel quite like the truth, and José elbowed him gently in admonishment.

“And I should have asked! Just- take the apology, okay? I don’t- you were right, I was so caught up in. In being a King, when I should have been talking to you more. Both of you. I’ve been a terrible friend, and I-”

“Gawrsh, you’re not a bad friend, Mick!” Goofy interrupted, sitting up. “Bein’ King is a big job is all! Gotta learn how to balance your job and your friends, but don’t you worry, you’ll get there!”

Mickey sniffled. Donald forced himself to sit up to look at him. His body protested, but he pushed it aside.

“You should have talked to me,” Donald agreed, voice harsher than he

meant it to be. “Yeah. We both know that. Nothing new. But what really gets me is you keep listening to *other* people about me. You just decided I *couldn’t* know anything about magic, so you never even bothered to ask me what Yen Sid was talking about. Not once.”

Mickey winced. Donald fought between his anger at the entire thing and the sheer exhaustion that was trying to drag him back down. He was so *tired,* and not just physically. He couldn’t seem to go ten minutes without feeling like everything around him was weighed down by responsibility and worry.

Beside him, Panchito made an odd noise, like he was about to interrupt and bit it back. José tugged Donald a bit closer.

“I thought we were past this,” he admitted, sighing. The weight won over his anger. “Gods, Mick, I thought *you* of all people wouldn’t just *ignore* me without even asking once.”

Because Donald wasn’t going to just jump in and defend himself unless he *had* to, it was a waste of his *time* when it was always happening from all sides. Scrooge, Della. Random people they met. Teachers, fellow students. His bosses and coworkers. If he spent every waking moment fighting to be heard, understood and listened to, he’d never get anything *done,* so why bother?

The people that mattered would listen. He’d found them, in José and Panchito, in Daisy for a time. He’d thought he had that in Mickey, but apparently when the right person told him Donald was dangerous or incompetent, he listened.

And now here Donald was again, faced with either explaining himself *again* and talking someone through their misconceptions like they’d had *no* effect on *him,* shouldn’t he just be happy they were all on the same page, why linger on the hurt feelings when it was over already,

let it go, or… well, talking Mickey down. Giving him some way to pretend he'd been at least partially right. Play down the betrayal and the hurt to spare himself the work of handling Mickey's guilt.

Lying, José would call that. Lying, and hurting himself to do it. Making himself small to avoid inconveniencing anyone.

Panchito would just sigh. Donald could never decide which was worse.

"Don…"

He couldn't do this right now. Why was it always *always* his job to deal with these things?

"You didn't give us the space to help you more, or to tell you anything," Donald told the ceiling. "You didn't talk to Goofy either, or one of us would have mentioned the world order spell. You just. You assumed it was fine, because it was for *you,* and you assumed we'd tell you if something was wrong. And sure, that's fair, we should have talked more. Communicated when we had the time and space…"

"Donald, this isn't just about the world order spell, or the Summons…" Mickey insisted, stepping closer. Donald felt Panchito shift slightly.

"Except the reason we *didn't* talk to you was because of the spell," Donald said simply. "Felt pretty clear that you'd already made a decision about what was more important by placing it. We didn't know that you *didn't,* Mick, from where Goofy and I were we thought you'd done it on *purpose.* That you didn't trust us enough to follow the rules, so you made sure we couldn't."

Sora, lying near him, was very, very still. Donald didn't want to do this here, not with him in the room, but Mickey had started it here and now, and soon they would have *more* people in the room checking in, and-

And if he had asked Sora to leave, Sora probably would have. He was a good kid. But he'd be hurt all over again.

"Goofy?" Mickey asked, while Donald fought to keep his eyes open. He'd been awake for a few minutes at best and he was exhausted already. He just wanted to go back to sleep. Maybe when he woke up he wouldn't be here, dealing with this.

"We did think you knew," Goofy admitted easily. "I figured it was important enough to you that we keep those secrets, you probably had a good reason. Something more than what we knew, cause you're the King, and we weren't. But not gettin' to talk about Maxxy, that hurt."

"I know, pal, but with how dangerous everything was.. I thought you both agreed with me," Mickey replied. "I didn't know you couldn't even talk at *all."*

"Would that have changed anything?" Goofy asked, surprisingly serious. "Not about the spell, but about the secrets an' all. Would you've been alright with us talkin' about our kids or home lives if we were vague about 'em?"

Mickey was quiet. For far too long.

Scratch what he'd been thinking, Sora did *not* need to hear this.

“Can you hash this out somewhere else?” He asked. “Or at least later? I’m about to fall back asleep.”

“Yes, Donald needs more sleep!” José agreed immediately, like he’d been waiting for a signal.

He probably had.

“Oh!” Mickey said in surprise. “Right! Yeah, we’ll let you rest a bit more, guys. I’ll tell the others to just let you sleep, okay?”

“Mmmhmm. Thanks, Mick,” Donald murmured. He heard Goofy stand (nearly knocking something over), and presumably shuffle towards the door.

“We'll get some snacks for when you’re more awake!” Goofy announced cheerfully, but Donald could tell it was somewhat forced. Hopefully he was just tired, too.

“Sleep well,” Mickey replied quietly, and there was the sound of a door opening, then closing.

Quiet, for a moment.

“Are you actually tired, or did you just want them to leave?” Sora whispered; his voice was muffled, like it was pressed against something. Donald forced his eyes open to glance over.

“Both,” Donald confessed immediately. Sora huffed a laugh into the bed. They were both sprawled in medical beds (nice ones!) in a Disney castle room based on the decor. The two had been pushed close enough that they were effectively one massive bed, which explained the cuddle pile Donald had woken to. “How’re you doing?”

“Ugh. *Weird.* Strelitzia says that our bodies were recreated when we got to Quadratum, so these ones probably aren’t meant to be *here,* or something,” Sora said immediately, flopping around until he freed himself from a mass of blankets and was staring up at the ceiling, gesturing absently. “Like, new skin, new hair, and you’d think that wouldn’t be too bad but I think my *organs* are new too!”

“Does that mean your taste buds are new too?” Panchito asked him, leaning over. “You can try all your favorite foods for the first time again!”

Sora looked intrigued at that.

“Maybe I’ll like that spicy ice cream Axel found this time!” He proposed, and Donald laughed. “Hey, come on, I might!”

“Sora, I’m pretty sure that stuff was meant for pranks, not to actually be *eaten!”*

“But *he* ate some!” He protested, pointing to Panchito, who was laughing into his hat.

“Panchito could probably eat literal *fire,* don’t trust his taste,” Donald grumbled, but he couldn’t cover his smile fast enough. José nodded in agreement.

“Sim, he can! Donald, don’t you remember, with the jugglers?”

“That doesn’t count, he didn’t actually eat it, just breathed fire *after*. Using alcohol!”

“But it’s called fire eating!” Pancho pointed out with a broad grin. “Why shouldn’t it count?”

“Just because it’s in the name-”

Sora was laughing, and Donald relaxed. Sora was home, safe, alive and well, didn’t seem to be having the memory issues that Strelitzia had mentioned-

Wait.

“Where’s Strelitzia?”

“Oh! She’s probably in the library again,” Sora replied. “She’s trying to find her brother, but it turns out she’s from a *really* long time ago, so she’s not sure where to start. Also, apparently she knew someone who looks *just* like Ventus-”

“Really? There are *three-”*

“-and they had the same name,” Sora continued, with the air of someone telling a very unfunny joke. “And hey, did you know Ventus has *amnesia?”*

“No.”

“Yup! Doesn’t remember anything before arriving at the Land of Departure, and he was already a teenager with a keyblade by that point!” Sora exclaimed, while José and Panchito stifled laughter because *they* didn’t have to deal with this nonsense for much longer. Bastards.

Donald groaned.

“So she and he are probably from the same *really* long time ago, and Ventus just doesn’t remember,” Donald surmised. “Least that should make her brother a bit easier to find.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because if it was that long ago, *most* people would assume he died of old age,” Donald said bluntly. Sora winced.

“Huh. Yeah. Hey, is it weird that nobody ever seems to die? They all just keep on going,” he mused, falling back onto his bed. “Like we’re not allowed to rest while this whole light and dark thing is happening.”

“I think Death is just slacking off,” Donald replied, hoping to lighten the tension in the room, and was wholly unsurprised to feel a phantom brush of dry wind ruffle his exposed feathers.

He *had* basically been jinxing himself by saying it.

Thankfully for my ego, Donald Duck, *I am not so easily offended by someone's assumptions about when their time is up.*

Nobody else in the room reacted. Donald opted to ignore it. He could already feel himself falling back asleep, and couldn't say for sure he hadn't imagined it anyway.

Phooey to that, he thought as he drifted off. 'Time being up' was just another way of talking about prophecies and future telling. If it was it was, and if it wasn't, it wasn't.

A Proper Delayed Goodbye

“So you guys just walk through this, and you go home?” Sora asked, looking around the portal room. It wasn’t much to look at, really; a carved stone door set into one wall, only openable by the Kingdom Key Mickey carried, and that was it. The spells that made the whole thing run were hidden in the masonry, invisible to the naked eye. Anyone who managed to wonder in would likely think the room was just a storage room.

“Sometimes I send them home directly, if it’s not easy to get back here,” Mickey explained cautiously, like he was weighing each word. He wasn’t making eye contact with either Donald or Goofy; through accident or plotting by others, they hadn’t spoken privately since the last one.

Donald was fine with it. Really, genuinely fine with it. Mickey had made a decision to trust someone else, fine. Keeping his cards close to his chest meant people *wouldn’t* talk to him about things he knew, because they had no reason to think he could answer. And while Mickey had clearly had more to say about it all, Donald was done handling it.

He felt off, still, like something had reached into him and scooped out his insides. His chest remained numb and strange, though that might be the Healing still chewing over the scarring throughout his body. The prosthesis wasn’t ready yet, but they would reach out when the tester was available.

Because they *could* reach out. With the reveal of other dimensions out of the way, Ienzo had retooled their phones to, they thought, work on both sides. The time shift would likely make conversations strange, but so long as some kind of contact could be made, Donald didn’t care.

It had really troubled Sora to learn how old Donald and Goofy were. Or more accurately, how old they were *now,* and how much younger they'd been when they met the first time. That it was possible the next time they came, they could be years older again.

Donald hated this. Hated that they had to be separated, even if they could stay in touch. Sure, Sora had his friends, lots of them, but the only adults in his life were prior Organization members and *Yen Sid.* Unless he went back to Radiant Gardens to talk to the Restoration crew, but even they treated him less like the teenager he was and more like the adult he'd had to be. He needed someone that didn't on some level depend on him, and Donald couldn't provide that while he wasn't even *there.*

Mickey had banned visits to Duckburg. Donald hated that too. He got it, he *did,* the doors didn't *work* like that. They would let Sora leave, but they didn't know if they would allow him *back.* Mickey could open the doors for himself from either side, but there was no easy way to test if *Sora* could pass through again. It could leave Sora stranded on their side. Which wasn't an option, nor was it a good idea to tempt fate. But he didn't have to like it.

He wanted to take Sora and the others to see where he really lived, so sue him.

It wouldn't be fair anyway, because what he really wanted was to get the kid out of this dimension entirely, take all of them and give them an actual childhood somewhere else. And he couldn't do that.

Shouldn't, anyway. He'd certainly be thinking about it. There were plenty of Keyblade wielders (except Donald didn't want to leave them behind either; this dimension was so *dangerous*… and he missed them all.)

Sora was still looking at the door. He seemed put out about it.

If Donald didn't really have to get home, he'd offer to stay. Take another jaunt around a few worlds, say hi to some people. But the egg was still with Fenton, and who knew how long it had been? Not to mention the rest of the family…

He missed his kids.

"Are you leaving right now?" Sora asked.

Donald bit back a sigh of defeat.

"I mean- we should probably get everyone home, Sora," Mickey said, cutting off Donald before he could- well, he didn't know what he'd been about to say.

"Can you at least stay one more night? We could stargaze? Aqua said they used to do that all the time, before- she was hoping for a clear night, tonight."

Given they could travel between worlds so easily now, there was bound to be a clear sky *somewhere.*

Donald glanced at Mickey, who looked back and slowly nodded.

"If the others are alright with it-" he began, and Sora was already letting out a whoop and bolting from the room, shouting about telling everyone.

“We should see if any worlds have marshmallows,” Donald observed quietly in the silence of the room. “Make a whole thing of it.”

“Donald…”

“We don’t need to keep rehashing this Mickey.”

“But-”

“ *No.* I’m done. You’re sorry, it’s over.”

“Don! That’s not what I’m trying to do here!”

“Then what *are* you trying to do?” Donald asked, turning to look at him. “Cause where I'm standing, you’re feeling guilty about how things went and hoping you can apologize enough to fix it.”

“Well, yeah, you apologize when you’ve done something wrong!” Mickey insisted, stomping closer. “Then you make it up to them!”

“You’ve apologized, I don’t need you to do *anything,* and now you’re just making me deal with you feeling guilty! It’s not my job to fix that!” Donald snarled, temples pounding. “ *Why is it always my job to fix things?!”*

The words felt like they bounced around the stone walls, echoing and repeating until they lost all meaning and were just garbled noise. Like

everything else that came out of his mouth. Noise, nothing but noise.

Mickey's face turned mulish.

"I just want to go back to normal," he insisted, crossing his arms.

"You do that," Donald snapped. "Just do me a favor and leave me out of it, since clearly I'm not needed for that part. You can self-flagellate without making me watch."

He didn't linger to watch Mickey find a way to, somehow, make it his issue again; he apparently had to help make up a stargazing party.

If before Mickey was avoiding him with a guilty air, now he was doing so with a sense of annoyance. Donald got the impression he was being given the silent treatment.

He ignored it and continued explaining s'mores to the teens, some of whom had never had a bonfire *or* a s'more before, and that took priority over everything else.

"They're so messy!" Aqua laughed, licking dripping chocolate off her fingers with a look of amused concentration.

"You've gotta open your mouth wide enough to get it all at once!" Axel insisted, while Xion attempted to follow his advice and ended up looking like a chipmunk, cheeks bulging while she made an effort to chew. She was giggling too hard to be very effective, though.

Sora, Riku and Kairi, who were at least familiar with the idea, had moved to lay out blankets on the hill; they'd set up on the outskirts of Twilight Town, since they always seemed to have good weather, and it meant Hayner, Pence and Olette could join them.

It also meant they'd been able to get marshmallows from Remy, who'd been intrigued by the recipe and had really done well with minimal time to prepare something. Dagobert had been a touch annoyed at them eating up his chef's time, right until Donald explained what Rocky Road ice cream was and he'd gone off with a bang to get a *new* flavor out before anyone else had heard of it.

So sue him, if he was here all the time it would be nice if *his* favorite flavor was available. Sea salt was all well and good, but it got a bit old after a while.

Panchito was watching the fire, carefully raking the coals to give a perfect marshmallow roasting spot without the entire fire going out; it was a bit chilly. José hovered, not because of worry but because he loved watching Panchito work. He said the focus of someone doing something they were an undisputed master of was one of his favorite things to watch.

He'd winked when he said it, and when Donald had asked what he liked to watch *Donald* do, he had only laughed.

Privacy. As soon as they got home? They needed some *privacy*.

The rest of the crowd was sprawled on the hillside, chatting, eating, relaxed. Strelitzia sat slightly away, but he didn't think she was avoiding anyone; she was staring at the stars like she'd never seen them before. It had been actual millennia since she'd seen this sky.

He wondered if anything had changed.

Donald went to sit next to her.

“My brother is out there somewhere,” she said when he’d settled in. “One of those stars, he’s there.”

Donald tilted his head back to stare at the sky.

“You know, my sister got lost in space for eleven years?” He said quietly. There was a small shuffle of fabric. “We didn’t even know if she’d survived the storm; her ship got lost, communications broke down and- we didn’t know where she’d been blown off to. There’s a lot of space out there, after all.”

“But you found her?” She asked, and her hope was a dangerous, painful thing. Strong, but painfully brittle. A delicate strand of diamond.

“She found us, really, made her own way back,” he mused. “Eleven years. Her kids were eleven by then, she’d only just laid them when she was lost; they’d only seen her picture before that moment. Never thought they’d get to see her alive.”

Silence. Strelitzia shifted closer.

“I’m glad she found her way home,” she said simply. He wanted to laugh, just a bit, but refrained. It really was that simple, wasn’t it. She’d been lost, then returned. Everything else was just set dressing.

“So am I.”

Someone sat down on Donald’s other side.

“What’s your sister like?” Sora asked. He held out a s’more, but didn’t seem that upset when Donald shook his head, shoving half of it into his mouth in one bite.

“Loud.” Donald answered immediately, startling a laugh and a spray of crumbs from the kid. “She’s… adventurous. Always wants to be going somewhere, doing something. Exploring, finding artifacts and investigating legends. Our uncle’s the same way, they’re two peas in a pod. They want to see everything there is to see, things nobody else alive has ever found.”

“What, and you’re not like that?” Strelitzia giggled. Donald chuckled himself, because from *their* perspective…

“If I could sit at home and relax all day I would,” he told them honestly, leaning further back on his hands. “I like to see new things, sure, but I like to have some down time! But the job doesn’t stop calling just because I don’t want to answer.”

“The job…? You mean here?” She asked, and now Donald could tell others were listening to them. Why was it always in large groups when he was asked these things?

“Here, sometimes. Work, at home. The whole Blot thing is more of a… personal commitment,” he hedged carefully, aware that there were two people he didn’t want to overhear too many details. “And then there’s the family and their adventures. If they’re in trouble, I have to be there.”

“Sounds like a lot.” Sora looked thoughtful.

“It can be. So can being a Keyblade wielder,” Donald pointed out.

“There’s a lot of us!” Sora pointed out. “Who do you have helping you?”

That was the question, wasn’t it.

“Plenty of people, Sora. One of which is watching my egg right now, actually!” he laughed, hoping it would derail the conversation.

“Oh, an egg? I suppose- wait, you have a baby at home?” Strelitzia demanded, twisting to stare at him with big excited eyes.

“Yes!” He answered, pleased, while he could hear Panchito give that little trill he had when he was excited. “They’re about due for a checkup, actually; Pancho, did Xandra say when she’d be back to help with that?”

“Next week, or several months ago, I do not understand how time works here!”

“That’s so exciting! Congratulations!” She enthused, leaning forward. “Do you have any name ideas?”

“I have a few, but we haven’t talked about it all together yet,” Donald

told her, thinking about a few names he'd liked. Not a serious *list* list, just ones he'd heard and thought he could grow to love. But it wasn't just him doing it, this time. José and Panchito got equal say, and unlike Della's… options he was certain they'd pick *actual* names. He personally did love more old-fashioned names, ones with a bit of history to them, but he was more than happy to compromise so long as their child got a *name.*

Really. Turbo? Jet maybe, that could be a name, but Turbo was a description, not a name. And naming a child Rebel was asking for the kid *to* rebel, purely out of necessity. Someone named Rebel didn't get to be a banker. He was sure that had been Della's idea, to give her sons a path to adventure straight from birth, but what if the kid *did* want to be a banker when they grew up?

"When are they due? Or, um, is that the word? For an egg to hatch?" She asked.

"It's fine. And wish we knew," Donald admitted with a chuckle. "They're not a… standard egg, we don't actually know what species they're going to hatch into. Magic thing, we're hoping that the next checkup will give us more info on what to expect."

Thankfully for Donald's limited ability to think about their egg's origins, nobody asked about the magic thing. The conversation wandered away from him, to the stars, Strelitzia's brother Lauriam, the things the varying Keyblade wielders planned to do now that the main threat to their worlds was dealt with. Donald wasn't holding his breath, that Master of Masters gave him a bad feeling, but they were well trained enough to handle that when it came. Let them enjoy their reprieve for as long as it lasted. They'd more than earned it.

"So… you're all three dating? Or, um. How does that actually work?" Sora asked quietly, later, when the others happened to be further away. He was staring at the fire.

“It takes communication, mostly. Talking to both of them so we’re all on the same page,” Donald said simply. “So long as everyone agrees, and you’re checking in with each other, we make it work just fine.”

“But like- do you just go on dates with José, and then Panchito? And then they date each other? Is that a thing?”

“We’re all three dating each other, Sora,” Donald replied. “Sometimes it’s only two of us on a date because the third person is busy, or we want one on one time, but mostly it’s all three of us.”

“It’s that easy?”

“Relationships aren’t really easy, Sora,” Donald said quietly, glancing over to watch Panchito and Axel toss a fireball back and forth. “Good ones are just worth the effort.”

Sora hummed, and leaned back on his hands to look at the sky.

“I want something like that,” he admitted, like it was a terrible secret. Donald didn’t bother glancing into the crowd around them; he was fairly sure he knew where Sora was carefully *not* looking.

“You’ll find it, kid.” he promised.

“You sure? I mean…”

“Can I swear that you’ll end up being together forever? No. Can’t promise a specific person will be there, either, although if I had to *guess,* you’ve got nothing to worry about,” he chuckled, watching Sora’s eyes widen and flick down, before going back to the sky. “But yeah, Sora, I’m certain you’ll find exactly what you’re looking for.”

Partially because unlike Sora, *he* could see two pairs of eyes watching them closely from the other side of the fire.

Subtle, these kids were not. He hoped one of them got the gumption to ask the others soon; they’d had to wait long enough to be all in one place again.

They had the send off in Twilight Town, so the ones not in the know would assume that their trip was going to end at Disney Castle. Which it would, in a way; it was only one more step through the door to get home, exactly where the portal had opened in the first place.

Donald was biting back tears, this time around; usually their goodbyes didn’t feel so dramatic, and he *still* hated leaving. With everyone aware that they were going further than Disney Castle…

Honestly, Mickey should be grateful the secret had come out when it had. How would he have kept Sora from wanting to visit them now that things were more peaceful? You could only blow off a possible trip so many times before the kids got suspicious something was off.

Sora had been the last to let them go, lingering and asking Mickey, again, if he could watch them leave. Or visit their world. Or-

But Mickey held firm, so it was with a back aching from the long tight

hug he'd received that Donald sailed them back to Disney Castle. The new phone in his pocket was like a lead weight against his hip. He hoped it would work.

Yen Sid had studiously avoided him since the mission to rescue Sora, so Donald was entirely unsurprised to receive a request for a brief meeting before he left. Mostly to discuss the trip home; José and Panchito had been fitted with special magic trackers, out of a concern the portal might fling them elsewhere again.

"The limitations are meant to keep interlopers from accessing the open doorway itself; there have been non-Summoned individuals that have used the door without issue in the past," Yen Sid pointed out in his grave tone. Donald agreed, but had also insisted on the trackers.

"Better safe than sorry," he replied simply.

"A level of caution I have grown to not expect from you."

Donald rolled his eyes.

"Personally I expect Masters to make fewer baseless assumptions, but we can't always be right, can we?" He asked snidely. Yen Sid didn't so much as twitch.

Shame. Donald put some pride into how irritating he could be when he put his mind to it.

"I have made some assumptions, based on erroneous data," Yen Sid said. His tone was so confident and deep it took a moment for Donald to realize that it was an admission. "It has come to my attention that I

am missing *quite* some information about your realm, and as a result, did not think to question the narrative the King provided. He did advise at the time that he was not a mage by trade, but the concept of the mere study of magic being secretive did not occur to me."

Of course he was more concerned with not blaming Mickey than with everything else, Donald thought with a huff.

All hail the King, after all.

"If you're looking for a tutorial, I'm not your man," Donald told him bluntly. "Not because I don't like you. But my training wasn't remotely orthodox; there's not much I can tell you that applies to anyone except me."

And also because Donald didn't like him.

Yen Sid frowned at him. He was usually frowning, but this felt more directed.

"You did claim to be trained," he pointed out. Donald shrugged.

"I was told mostly how not to kill myself doing what I do. By a demigoddess witch who only let me leave when she realized I had other friends that might protest her keeping me," he said casually, thinking of the golden sands of Circe's island. " *Then* Selene corrected a few things and they got me back to my ship. Most of the rest had to learn on my own, in secret."

"Due to this… Phantom Blot."

“Would it make you feel better to know he does have a real name?” Donald quipped at his constipated expression, but his joke fell flat. “Yes, mostly because of him. Also because our world has an… odd relationship with magic. Plenty of people don’t believe in it at all. You can live a full complete life without ever interacting with something truly magical.”

“All life has magic at its core.”

“True,” he allowed with a tilt of his head. “But the magic existing and the magic *manifesting* are different things. The first exists without active acknowledgement; a tree simply will have magic, nothing about it. But it’s not going to cast a spell; that takes Intention. If there are few beings in a world that have that intention and skill to apply it, magic becomes a rare thing to *experience,* even if it exists all around.”

“But there *are* experts, clearly. Beyond the two gods you have mentioned.”

“Yes.”

“And you did not seek *them* out?”

Donald wondered if he was being judged. He felt judged, but Yen Sid just gave him that feeling naturally, so he couldn’t say for sure.

“No. There was another issue that prevented it.”

“That being?”

“Not really your business, frankly!” Donald said with a grin. “I didn’t *need* magic training at the time, it was purely academic. And by the time it became needed, it was a bit late to seek out anything, so I had to figure things out on the fly.”

“Hmm.”

Donald glanced out the window. He was hoping that the artificial magic crystal would be done before he left; they hadn’t thought so, and Donald didn’t want to linger any longer, but maybe they’d get lucky enough to get a new prototype to test out. Panchito hadn’t mentioned any new progress, but maybe some breakthrough had occurred while they were gone.

He’d like to have something in hand when he went home. It would make this all feel more real.

“Thank you for your time, Master Donald. I have much to consider regarding your realm; it appears my lack of knowledge has caused a number of incorrect deductions to be made. I will be revisiting them while you are away.” Yen Sid finally said, and Donald blinked at him, mildly startled at the title, before nodding carefully.

“When we’re not rushing out of here to relieve the eggsitter,” he found himself saying, “I can talk through things in more detail.”

He received a nod of acknowledgement, and he left the study more confused than when he had arrived.

The door opened with a creak. It always did; ominous magic doors had to, it was in their contract.

Goofy went through first, promising to text that he'd arrived and that he would wait to hear back that Donald and his guests had arrived safely.

Donald, José and Panchito were next; Mickey went last normally anyway, but this way if their trackers went off the rails there was still someone to spot it immediately. He waved cheerfully as they walked through; Donald didn't know how to read his expression, so chose not to.

They held hands as they walked through. It probably wouldn't *work,* but it might at least save him some grief if he could feel them the entire time.

"A pleasure, Your Majesty," he said politely to Queen Ginny, who smiled back at him blandly. She wasn't as personable as Minnie had been, more composed, but Donald liked that about her. She was someone that took things seriously. It had been her that had had to take the reigns of the Queendom when Minnie had decided to abdicate and follow Mickey back to their world, and she had done well.

"Safe travels, Master Donald. And friends," she added, glancing at José and Panchito, who waved cheerfully back.

Then through the doorway.

The feeling of traveling between worlds was disconcerting, but fast. Like your ears suddenly popping when you hadn't noticed them clogged, or a sharp burst of something different on the tip of your

tongue when you took a deep breath. Something familiar.

And in this case, metallic.

Donald opened his eyes. Felt the magic flicker and put him back in the clothing he had left in, the Paperinik uniform, with mask intact. José was back in his suit and mask, Panchito as well.

“PK! You’re back- you’ve been gone for two days!”

Donald blinked, staring, because that- that was Darkwing. What was Darkwing doing here?

Wait. *Two days?*

“Phooey.”

His family was going to kill him!

End Notes

Note: This is NOT following canon after season 2. Parts of the 3rd season have been cannibalized for parts

EDIT: We have fanart!

UPDATE THERE ARE SO MANY GOOD ARTS I HAVE LOST TRACK OF A FEW SO PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SEND ME LINKS IF I MISSED SOMETHING <3 <3 <3

Genuinely so honored that people have created such amazing artwork for this fic <3

https://www.tumblr.com/teaboxcarmarbles/724035088018456576/i-wanted-to-draw-art-for-kyprishprohetess-fanfic

https://twitter.com/boxy1412/status/1684763110777716736?s=46&t=OFJ8Pt8Rd8b3iGdW5j9wfA

https://www.tumblr.com/issak/760216491765432320/mangroves

https://www.tumblr.com/aspectnotarized/774508074384883712/scene-from-masks-within-masks-chapter-121-donald?source=share

https://www.tumblr.com/kiiwiighost/728147619457695744/heres-a-fanart-i-did-for-an-amazing-fanfic-i-read

https://www.instagram.com/p/CvNzYzKAPBy/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

Works inspired by this one

so show me family (all the blood that I would bleed) by inkandstone

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!